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APOCALYPTIC MULES

By

Jonathan Hill

B.A., Rhodes College, 2001

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

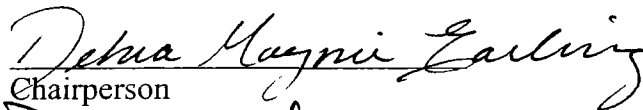
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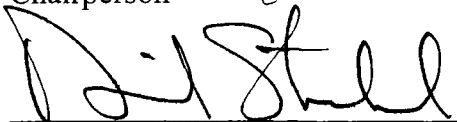
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THE POOLMAN

I DON'T TAKE AS MANY chances as I used to. Dogs, Tilt-A-Whirls, beautiful women like nothing else, the Staver's place on Highland Ave. Working there a morning after one of Mrs. Staver's high-end fashion parties — confetti, blinky lights in the trees older than the money she's got — I was bend over a drain, getting the pool ready for the winter. Then out of leftfield or another big place, these golf balls started mortar firing down on me from trajectories like hail. One in the pool. Two on the roof. Titilists. "What in the goddamn," I said and left the drain and looking in through windows to see if Mrs. Staver was home. She wasn't there. So I hurried up to finish with the pool, a four-leaf clover shape if God in heaven ain't a royal asshole for giving me a bit of emblematic luck. I really had to concentrate, too. I felt like the driving range kid roaming around in his bit of tractor collecting the balls as people try to decapitate him. He's doing his job for minimum wage; I'm doing mine for half a grand. I mean I try to do it, too. Go angry, tee up a ball, swing for the fences to annihilate the kid's ass. But so I got back over the drain, pulling out twigs, a good piece of sausage, and I felt something like crack me in side of my head. I got the flash, went down headfirst, like out cold, easy, into the goddamn water. I tried explaining my tragic pool man, tragic accident, no fun story to Mrs. Staver later that week, and she told me, "It's a miracle you didn't die." Money in her voice, you know. So I pushed her

and got up in her face, showing her the Dracula scar and yellow bruise on my face. “Real funny, ain’t it,” I said ‘cause when I was down in her water I thought myself SOL dead. Only I guess Mrs. Staver must’ve came home right then and let her ugly Lassie dog out back, thinking me finished ‘cause the stupid dog immediately dove in at me and chomped down on my head so I had to come to, you know. I mean I got out of that water and sent my desperate ass home fast. Only on top of Mrs. Staver, I didn’t tell her this here last part ‘cause I wanted her to love me. “Lady, how’d I live if I didn’t tie?” I said and I must’ve been smiling like a man who believes in miracles ‘cause right then she asked me my name and I said it and she goes, “You do live dangerously,” and now I just want to be left alone, you know. I never wanted to fall in love just ‘cause I told my story.

PALACE

[1]

The great thing eventually happens: it is
our fault & how unpredictable
a gesture at first it is as I go amongst this traffic & capital of noise
faceless to the rules I live. You must plea, bear in woman a single
fact thus set: who will caution us
in terms of any future. The palace tie indeed the blood tie
a thing bound to happen is

— said Blake: The road of excess,
& of its voice say or her hands
on mine I have largely in fact
so delicate & longed for
a palace: fabric of woman in the garments of woman: blouse, ribbon
strap, her small of back may
capture, to the armpit or breast, always a game.

A glass of water w/ lemon is so unlike a glass of
oil w/ flower one must be a child

all one's life in the presence of woman,
must reply then what unadmitted: I will not even guess

rescue from oblivion, her body of common feeling:
eloquent, stubborn, I miss never stops

as feeling waits upon her gesture — it is the most
impossible trick: to walk our manmade streets

in shared isolation & anonymous to
her body as cloth & seeing not one difference btwn.

Blessing is a crucial task & the palace it is
also seeing thru: illusion, lust, stones lovemaking rivers & its seeing
is enough to seduce as I recollect of nights, city & you —
a furious act now dry now on a hook, instinctively right as

I have jus' more or less recently proposed.

Jess is an actress w/ secure
\$375.00 a month job & one of my most bothersome (she says)

habits is holding on to the memory of something as remaining the
way it was when it isn't anymore & (I want to write 'as if')

I have gone and made the simplistic and shallow
energetic and even violent mistake

of loving yet looking out a wall or this window —

The palace is closer to us perhaps than our original homes.
The palace as invisible shadow falls between us,

and we cannot know in advance
it'll be different.

[2]

Again: to be naked & w/out disguise left alone
in a stairwell at 60th St. & 5th Ave. is not allowed.

The truly memorable is always associated w/ the most painful
whatever it is & no man is a palace entire: if at my own

emergency I no longer pretend to sleep in the kind of hellholes
men are fit to go living in & I no longer pretend what's to stop you.

then dying scared is no good for your future.

Taken from here: last night's brief & cryptic exchange on the phone to
Memphis helped me burn close to a hundred photographs of her

sleeping & if the butterfly is one example —

winged adult, pupa to
caterpillar & home,

then we carry no compass inside ourselves to find the palace
ever anywhere at all: lie low & keep your own rather

than speak the bare choreographies of these everyday scenes or a
pretty girl you got to take it easy w/.

Chances are 1 in 800,000 & yes the blind man's response is die
tough: there being not one rhythm into a child's world I never had

as a child: home: lemongrass: TRUST IN GOD & SIN BOLDLY.

There is no counting back to one.

Tho as I speak: Jess is alone on the stairwell & Petey

[our Dear Master of Partways] is out in the front yard so juiced on
Turkey & tonic he's singing love ballads to the newlyweds across

the street. Asshole's so full of his own shit he \ only wants TWO wings \
To veil my face \ And I want TWO wings \ To veil my face

\ And the world can't do me no harm, but you may feel, besides life as it is, also life as it ought to be.

I am no longer on a gin drunk or a train headed for coal & I trust you will forgive mistakes not meaning by 'forgive' that one should

overlook playing matador w/ fast moving cars.

No bond is thus possible & let's call it something else.

The story of a genius w/ his back to the audience is the rust

we value & you do give me much hope,

to make connections. To lay claim to all things in any river in any translation.

The other day I spent 1 hr. & a half w/ Jess saying the *corpse* after all is human erasure & if ever hit by car

save genuine feeling for later.

The palace from one life is untranslatable in the next & if ever the palace is boundless

then it is wisdom that's bound to the palace.

And I so fetishized the idea.

This entire last year I lost all sense of talking and listening at the same time & am not thinking how *romantic* or *short-lived*. I, too, was found curled up asleep at the door by the sixty-eight yr. old woman whose home it was & I took your warnings of all the artists who died there.

So surely did Jess & I move into this place & invent bullshit why we wanted to go there: half a burnt out building (our half's livable.)

Only we can't remember any of the jokes that were made
or why we laughed at them so hard.

The said faux-pas was that we had this big empty space introducing us

into a daily life come too soon & I'm sorry if I misunderstood: Today is Thursday & Chicago's stockyard loop is not the prairie & Jess was diagnosed w/ ms this last Monday & after the pelvic she held a piece of glass to the doctor's face.

Sometimes one might say that she has provoked accident w/ an impatient finger in order to see what it would do, but I can't say

if I see her, I'm gone.

One day it's at the movies & photographs have always evoked loss while trying to preserve life & the old story of the Greek artist who threw a sponge loaded w/ color at the head of a painted horse is as you take it: I mean I went downtown to the bar w/ Petey and some girls tonight to meet Jess & Jess was no show, but Petey was such a flattering portrait of what you'd expect a knight to be I stood right behind him the whole night on the lookout for strays & this one girl (at once beast, socialite) was so fucking loaded & lost to her parents, I kept asking myself if but do I have w/ *tenderness* the old game down, but nostalgia made every sip another chance & so I shed my clothes & opened my face out of the usual way to cheat myself & told everyone inside the bar there'd be a woman

in my death & it's true: what we do not bring to consciousness we will experience as fate only what I had done was to carry w/ all the wonders I sought w/out —

We got to get the wounded out 'cause when it's over:

I will not reveal, I'll not assume, I'll
refuse the exterminating angel, the avant-garde, beauty, anything
which's uninjured /

& after obsessing about it, let's just forget Jess
didn't show.

There are veterans out here tonight & 50 million tons of coal.

[3]

The last word will jolt you.

As if the new name for our corruptions is fire.

& if yet winter is the last act now,
at exactly the crucial moment you may bleed to death very fast.

The air has gone windless for days & can you take it

the way confession occurs:

‘maybe later’

never comes: the greatest joy: go ahead & try.

I once told Jess I was very dull yet a young man born some years ago
& I found her beauty rather sweet. She put it like this: you wear a mask
your whole life & it grows to fit you face. Not exactly the saddest
admission of failure on my part but I had gone, ‘You can’t dance in shoes,
can you?’ & Jess got real upset & said, ‘Don’t ask yourself if it is a *work
of art* only if it’s necessary,’ but I didn’t hear her right ‘cause some people
spend a lot of time thinking about sex & some people like to have a lot of
sex others little or others none. Some people like spontaneous sexual
scenes others highly scripted ones and others spontaneous sounding ones
so nonetheless predictable but all I really wanted was a bit of ass &
all deadly thoughts, but so many things had happened lately w/ the rush of
Christmas, I remember that one was harder than
the last: sudden brief attacks

of muscle weakness or strong

emotion may cause the body to fall helplessly.

Woman of a gray masterpiece: what is your name.

The result is a body of work and *the difference*

*between me and the Surrealists [said Dali] is that I am a
surrealist. The difference [said Dali] between me and*

a madman is that I am not mad. That’s one

of the reasons Jess is so articulate, thinned in a most
un-natural way w/ the exorcism one needs. To enter.

To proceed w/ great caution & it is in my experience
to suggest exorcism takes on depth & complexity

only in language or by ending at turns

every dog must know his kennel & yes you really can last out in
the open bleeding to death real quick if sometimes you

permit yourself a quick drive around the block in the car
to clear your head of desire.

Roll the windows down partway & roll thru every stop.

There will be a great deal of blood — but you'll have this
feeling so beautiful & clear turn as you turn left & left

again a mile down the way so natural — well, you actually won't
ever in your life see the palace or its courtyards or be able to gaze

at the hot little piece of princess up in the tower right by her
lonesome going on a few centuries now, but you will get one

better: you *will* know you're driving a real car.

[4]

Said Jess: Shouldn't we be leaving or return to the harbor. They've cut the long grass, the back of her hands sunburn & I don't know who will teach the fucking world to carry a human snake, & the only true reality for the prairie right after close on Beale makes me homesick. I am paranoid, uneasy w/ morning. Reading Stevens & transparent to desire: *After the final no there comes a yes*, he'd said, *And on that yes the future world depends*. I do not torture myself of the distance. The bottom line is not spelled out & days I kept to myself as Jess kept on giving her mother, who has art confiscated from Viennese Jews, these nightmares. I don't know who it was who found inspiration in sleep deprivation. *We must not be too ambitious* — Said Churchill: *We cannot aspire to masterpieces* as French artists are little known (or admired) in the cooling American sector. The Palace. The fuss of it all, I now realize, took place yesterday. What I deserve is room to deal. The moral decay is implicit, it's personal. We have no theoretical support to offer. Walk around. 23 million Americans suffer migraines & I only see the differences between men & a painful exception to this rule of distance, when I have myself recite all the muscles in the human face or finally find a perfect fusion to make them pattern an irrelevant act: one hesitates to use all things as a good antagonist. I find it just' terrible 'cause nobody touches your face like they should. Walk around: *a good answer to lack-of-responsibility in on3*

another is: 'That's our problem.' Bad Things For Love. Petey, you are my favorite hen. Teenage girls are playing *run-sheep-run* in them Midwestern towns & the difference is like the one. It hurts to be shot & you will feel cheated if it never happens, but isn't it that you are disturbed about us and that flooding out what we are with over-feeling seems to make a close possible. AS I SAID: THE PALACE GHETTOS THE WORLD OVER, look just' deep enough. Darwin, the masses. Who needs to know what we are to have to do not even so much for the palace & I got some friends inside more or less willing more or less gone more or less resisting as long as they can get inside & Jess, Petey: They are not of rising & setting suns but they do have this particular magic: this extraordinary sense of timing & the palace is the expression of palm leaves on the surface/ of all things as all's surface in one's use of language. What of living kind to that dying: I run the risk is not the same as saying the fucking war's over. I say now I & the palace have the same shape. All is complicated & strange. Chewed up & swallowed. Then again as I predicted: Jess is hideous, atrociously dramatic & really interesting today be this come-to-papas, same nervous prose, same impossible trick: The palace was what it was where it came from & thinking about the palace or knowing it's just a mile down that way to you hasn't helped me much. The question is 'what you gotta get' & the struggle appears.

I do have the general notion I'm getting closer & even if thru an ice storm or thru one bridge,

I'm still banged up after Jess & I drove across the Mojave to Vegas to get married & then took separate hotel rooms in separate casinos to fight alone & I'll never have in my life played craps before yet from the look of it: The table feels hot.

BABY SARAH

WINTER OF '92 IN THE MELT. Baby Sarah wrung my ear 'cause I couldn't hear the dirty river inside the car. I'd hid my ditch weed real good under the floor mats and her crabby skull yearned big, bumped up against the bottom of the steering column, trying to find the stuff.

Baby Sarah ain't my girl. She's Neal Day's girl. Me, a boy at sixteen gettin' no love in these bankrupt eggshell parts that used to be Thompson's egg farm down by Lock and Dam # 20 until the chickens gave up and the City made the worn-out field a place called Martyr's Park, a crazy-quilt of mud, snow, sticks, woodpecker droppings.

The dirty river, Mississippi river, etc.

Baby Sarah untangled an arm from between my ankles, planted her fingers on my Adam's apple and said, "I'm not finding bullshit."

"I don't hear anything that sounds like a tearing," I said.

"Ain't nothing down here," she said then nibbled on my Achilles and sat upright, reached behind my seat, said, "I'll just change."

Thing was Baby Sarah understood the dirty river before I had a clue *things* had to happen at all. I don't like to believe girls at Osceola High mature faster than us boys, but right as she pulled and stretched a sequined tube sock prom dress from a bag and I watched her tackling the buttons on her plaid shit,

unclasping the front of her bra, I guess it was true.

“What am I supposed to hear?” I asked. “Chicken feet.”

Her shirt off, I grabbed for her goodie.

Earlier Baby Sarah told me like this: “When a man cries, a boy has a father and the red/silver prairie ache of this winter hesitates to follow you home.”

Again, Baby Sarah wrung my ear, gave my thigh a Charlie Horse then threw those wrinkled sequins on so fast I got real depressed.

“Neal will beat your ass,” she said.

“I know,” I said.

I’d never grab if Neal Day were around to warn me.

“One incident and now I’m incurable,” I said and actually lamented. “Tell me the corngirl thing then.”

“But I’m done,” she said.

“Keep going, P-L-E-A-S-E.”

Baby Sarah thought to wring my ear once more, her arm held out parallel to the gear shifter, didn’t do it, said, “I’ll get you there.”

THE NIGHT WAS MORP. The winter formal for underclassmen. MORP was not a sensationalized evening like a PROM themed on a Eric Clapton, “If I saw you in heaven” tune that required one to have a date or required one to take that date to Jumer’s or Head’s up in the Quad Cities, or required one to poison his date with grain alcohol and ditch weed just so silly-fucking with a condom at the

Airport Holiday Inn acted as ritual. One didn't attempt to 'put on the Ritz' at MORP 'cause MORP was PROM spelled backwards and the PROM seemed to be that absolute, pathetic *thing* meant to be charming and nostalgic. Going stag to MORP was okay. Us boys didn't have to wear tuxedos or sport coat and tie so we didn't, not with them flyers around the high school that read: BRING THAT SMILE & STAY AWHILE. No nostalgia. No charm. Girls had to do all that beauty-queen shit. Buy the dress. Corsage. I had to wear a tux 'cause my dad forced me.

POLICE FLASHERS SPUN A LIGHT throughout the inside of my Celica. Then Sheriff Unrath was pounding on my window.

No parkin' her after nine," he said. "Park's closed."

"Yes, sir," Baby Sarah told him, sucking on a penny and hiding the Boone's Farm under her dress. She couldn't get another MIP before she left for Italy to study graphic design or tapestries, I don't know. Neal Day didn't know about Italy. I did.

"Get on that road," Sheriff Unrath said then walked back to his Cruiser.

I was chewing on a cigarette butt and the stratosphere wanted to drop 11 fat inches of white on us.

"Get out of here," Baby Sarah said.

I pulled onto River Drive and saw the lights across the river on the Illinois side, spotlights on the I-74, and drove to MORP.

“When’s Neal out of the hospital?”

“He’s still there,” Baby Sarah said to the fogged window.

“My Daddy’s leavin’ tonight anyway,” I said.

“So.”

“When you leave for Italy?”

“Milano.”

“ME-LA-NOOO.”

“New Year’s day. I don’t want to be hangover, either.”

“I want to go to ME-LA-NOOO-OH.”

“You can’t paint for shit.”

“I don’t paint.”

“But I have talent.”

“You got nice tits and a big head.”

“Insecure?”

“No [*Nooooo*] way. I’m saying --”

What Baby Sarah heard in the dirty river must’ve told her to say,

“Deserted?”

“-- Tell *me* what to do here.”

THAT SOPHOMORE, TURN-POINT YEAR. The Holidome or Moline/Quad-City Airport Holiday Inn, a bright establishment, had putt-putt, shuffleboard, and a stuffed grizzly bear with a plastic rainbow trout super-glued to its jaw. The

grizzly's machine gun arms stretched over the Olympic pool with chlorine from the second-story indoor balcony by the Coke machines.

I PUT ON A HAPPY FACE. I moved inside the lobby with Baby Sarah behind me, ignoring the gawking of the other high school kids pointing at Baby Sarah and me.

Baby Sarah wasn't even my date.

In the BALLROOM cords of white Xmas lights hung from I-beams. Tangled balls of white X-mas lights on circular tables worked as centerpieces. Wine glasses filled with ice water had the following engraving:

MORP '92

THE DANCE

And if I'd had the responsibility to name this night instead of that Garth Brooks bull-dick, I'd have engraved MAKE ME REGRET EVER WANTING YOU on those wine/water glasses 'cause alone in my tux after I'd lost Baby Sarah at the coat check, pulsing from heel to heel in the rented kicks that balled my toes, no one made obvious reference to me looking like a goddamn waiter from Jim Bobcat's Catfish House. I was not relieved. Out of place in costume and without Baby Sarah I stood in the Fry-Ya-Own Shrimp and Veggie line to snag some grub when Baby Sarah, in that sequin killer tube sock, pulled me out of line. Sparkling grape juice stained the corners of her mouth, breastbone, and her impressive, unsound cleavage, for a wise and sloppy drinking fool.

Once so pure and waif and once so peck-able Baby Sarah's only bodily flaw in that goddamn-Jesus dress was her inflamed and bulbous throat where three remarkable bite marks scabbed over thanks to Small Pope. 'Cause Small Pope, in Home Economics last Thursday, threw a fork across the classroom after some punk urinated in his stash of gin-based lemonade. The fork, the fork tines tweaked three wolf bites in her throat. I couldn't keep my eyes off her throat in the BALLROOM 'cause I felt too guilty staring at her cleavage for longer than half-a-minute at a time as she led me away from the grub.

Small Pope drank a whole glass of that one part lemonade one part gin one part warm piss cocktail 1) with glee 2) with a shocking 'What the funk' expression/realization that wrecked his rough hewed face. Imagine my urine, my victory, anticipating for both of us, a disclosure of what went unnamed until MORP.

Baby Sarah had to choose between Small Pope and me. 'Cause whether I wanted to or not, I changed after MORP because the opposite of what gorged me in the center changed whether she wanted to or not.

Hungry and orgiastic, me and Baby Sarah or Baby Sarah and I jitterbug-chaperoned each other across the empty parquet dance floor, past the nodding, stoned-on-something DJ, to a *Rocky Horror Picture Show* anthem.

"This will hurt," Baby Sarah said in the Women's lounge and restroom, which had a love seat and a powder mirror and tasty little mints on a silver disc.

"Not likely weirdo," I said as Baby Sarah closed the door to the handicapped stall.

“Weirdo?”

“Freak a nature.”

She lifted her dress and reached under. Said and giggled, “Masturbator.”

I couldn’t see her goodie. Only thing I saw was shiny and metal.

“Masturbating masturbator,” she repeated.

I grabbed for her goodie and called her a Corngirl.

“Chronic masturbator.”

Goodie again.

She squeaked. Giggled once more, “Yeah right son.”

Baby Sarah yanked my hand off her hipbone and took a pocketknife and cut out my fingernail in a half-moon, slicing motion. I winced. I kicked my legs up and down. Then she took my thumb in her mouth with both her hands and ciphared what felt like a pint of chunky, syrupy, Type O positive me down her hatch. To vampire me. To desiccate me parched.

I had a grand view of her swollen neck and cleavage. Whoa boy, did I have humpin’ luggage like bowling balls in my rental trousers. Damn good I went stag to MORP instead of asking Mindy, the girl who Small Pope said had a crush on me. Goddamn rental trousers rendered my lower bestial features pretty much obvious. And only Baby Sarah would not care.

On her last slurp, she raised her head; our genitals only separated by sequins and rented trousers. We made goo-goo eyes each to each. Licked our lips and she began to tell me how all this worked, “Your turn to --”

-- And I fainted.

Way to go, champ.

BABY SARAH SAID STICK IT. Rumor, or myth, had it that after Baby Sarah lost the bet and was on her knees in the Men's Locker Room for two hours doin' what was then called The Kneecap Swashbuckling' Shuffle or The Funky Chicken Foot, or giving head to the entire offensive and defensive lines after our Osceola Hawks varsity football team beat the Buffalo Gladiators 107 to 7, she drove herself to the emergency room and had her stomach pumped. Rumor also had it that Baby Sarah had screwed a Latino kid from her last high school she went to before she snuggled up with Small Pope at Osceola high where there were no Latin kids or Blacks. Only white bread.

"You'll do it?" Clint Anderson, the nose guard for the Hawks, asked after the first game of the season and a week before the Buffalo game. "If we score or beat Buffalo by more than a hundred?"

His head leaned in to her shoulder and Garney, the right tackle, scooted closer in his chair to hear Baby Sarah's reply. Small Pope shoved Garney back in the chair at the kitchen table and he hit the wall behind him and broke a pigeon nick-knack. Small Pope had rushed for 260 yards against Dubuque and scored three touchdowns. Baby Sarah was somewhat, horribly shit-faced when she said, "Okay."

Small Pope covered her mouth.

She pushed the back of his fist away and leaned in to Clint, "I want to get

to know you guys.”

“You can’t spit either,” Clint forced out.

Small Pope pushed Clint over his chair and stomped on his wrist with his John Deere steel-toed boots.

“Goddamn,” Small Pope said to Baby Sarah. “Don’t be a slut about it.”

“You shouldn’t hurt your teammates,” she said.

“Goddamn you.”

If Baby Sarah had won the bet [thereby avoiding the fears in common with loving and none returned] her myth would have subsided to a Latino, hysterical encounter Small Pope had and could deal with. But instead, as if water smoothed a stone, her myth could not be contained or easily passed over in a glance.

I’d heard the rumor but I never saw or was told the scene as Baby Sarah must have told Small Pope. Ten boys and ten minutes roughly per boy tallied up to roughly an hour and forty minutes of persistent cock sucking.

Ten boys along the wall in the shower room with enough light for rounded shadows. Silent boys trying to be men as if by lawmen had to be silent. But the linemen and blockers punched each other in the arm, slapped one another’s nuts. I heard Clint came the instant his cock rested on Baby Sarah’s perma-chapped, lower lip and the Persian orange lipstick she wore on occasion.

And Garney Collins, Clint’s stooge, came after Baby Sarah slapped his abdomen, twenty minutes in. The winter presence of fruit flies in the locker room told me all there was to know about the smell. Sacrifice required ceremony.

Small Pope dealt. Or I saw him deal with Baby Sarah the way you might

forget tossing a rag doll into the corner of a bedroom for twenty years and remember only when you needed to know the meaning of the toss.

Baby Sarah tossed us all like that.

YOU AN ANGRY YOUNG MAN. Small Pope and his iron fist-a-cuffs slapped me no longer passed out. I came to on the Women's restroom floor with small hairs in my mouth.

"Your safe," Baby Sarah said as she tinkled in the handicapped stall.

Small Pope helped me to my feet, "He's a genital wart."

"She's a vampire," I told Small Pope.

No one answered me or told me otherwise.

With my bow tie gone and permanent wrinkles in my tux, we walked as a trio out into the BALLROOM. Found a table in a corner.

Two girls in hand-torn black gowns attempted to grind each other into sawdust on the dance floor. Small town Iowa encouraged isolated lesbian encounters and no touch zones for boys like me and isolated vampire assaults & battery. Half our high school wore the grunge uniform over a collared shirt and slacks or black mini-skirts and sleeveless red tops. The DJ nodded his head to the B-52's *Loveshack* like a stroke victim.

"Look at Mindy," I said and undressed her.

Baby Sarah scratched her chest, "*You* like her?"

"I'm a leg man."

Small Pope began stuffing the wine/water glasses in his tan blazer and Baby Sarah's banana slung purse. He slugged down a Budweiser. Said, "The kid can barely breathe, and the Jell-O, fuckin' J-E-L-L-O tastes so bad. Petey loves Jell-O."

"You can't bring that in here," I told him.

"Neither can mom in the ICU but they let her," he said and glanced at Baby Sarah who leaned on his shoulder. Used him like a crutch.

Nervous energy blew into my gut as a slow song began and Small Pope led Baby Sarah to the dance floor. I took off my rented kicks and walked over to Mindy and asked her to dance with me. I should've asked her if this was quiet? If this was time? Instead of risking the fine mist youth brings when Mindy said no and stared at my finger.

I dabbed that finger against the white tablecloth of Mindy's table, leaving nice bloody imprints for her to remember.

Was I in love with Baby Sarah?

Small Pope said she was beautiful. Beautiful did not tell me anything about her. The sky was beautiful. Des Moines was beautiful. But the sky had holes. And Des Moines built three MEGA malls in Urbandale. Baby Sarah was not beautiful 'cause like the sky and Des Moines you cannot touch her or them with your hands. To touch Baby Sarah was to know she was beautiful. I had not touched her yet the way she had to be touched. And that meant if I changed my attitude, if I meant to burden her with the invisible world of how I felt, I'd a done different. To be touched by Baby Sarah *was something* different. I'd really have

liked to find out what the dirty river told her and GIVE A DAMN, but you can't use sugar for gas, can you?

Beat me.

Garth Brooks twanged through his nose hairs past boogers and Garth Snot as Baby Sarah and Small Pope moved in quiet and in time.

Beat me square.

IN THE PARKING LOT. TO VAMPIRE ME. Small Pope led Baby Sarah and me to his Ford Ranger he'd parked next to the Celica. The stolen wine/water glasses clinked a crisp tssh in his pockets.

Small Pope leaned against the grill of his Ford and said, "Two girls over there in a Chevy offered me blotter acid for two bucks a dose and a blow job."

And he pointed behind him to a crowd of kids our age from a different high school, maybe, leaning into foreign autos. I asked, "You buy?"

"Nine," he answered.

"Stick 'em," Baby Sarah said. Grabbed the Boone's Farm in my backseat and drank. Handed the bottle to me but I had to drive. I said no. She handed me the bottle again and I drank.

"We should go back for the last song," Baby Sarah said.

Small Pope opened another Budweiser, "That was the last song. We have a motel room."

"You pretend you're a vampire?" I asked Baby Sarah.

“I am.”

“She is,” Small Pope said.

“I like to taste it on special occasions.”

“And you,” he punched my breastbone, “passed out like a nigger.”

“NIGGER?”

All of us heard the shout from two rows of automobiles away. Clint and Garney stood closer had walked and snuck up on us. Twenty feet away, Clint said, “Petey shit that cancer out yet, kid?”

I glanced at Small Pope and his skull bent toward the wet blacktop.

“Oh wow,” Baby Sarah grabbed my hand.

Petey was Small Pope’s older brother and had been diagnosed with a malignant ping-pong ball tumor in his lungs. In the left ventricle *that no one knew then had spread to Petey’s heart and D.I. tract*. Small Pope and his mother had been at the hospital full-time for the last week ‘cause Petey needed enough chemotherapy and meds to put down the whole Osceola Hawks Varsity team.

Petey, like Small Pope, had been an All-State running back at Osceola High three years ago. Small Pope neared his brother’s single-season rushing record later on that fall and then demanded he be switched to defense so as to not break Petey’s record.

Small Pope stomped his Budweiser can with his boot as foam and grit splashed on his pant leg. He bent down and tossed the crushed aluminum into my Celica. “I heard you,” he said.

“Beat their shit out,” Baby Sarah said.

Small Pope turned to Clint and Garney, still with his head pointed down, “I ain’t doing’ a thing.”

And he rushed them. A born and bread middle linebacker, Small Pope tackled Clint into the pavement. And as Garney moved in to kick Small Pope off Clint’s spine, I ran to help when Baby Sarah grabbed my arm.

“Get in the car,” she told me.

And I did. I jumped in the Celica with Baby Sarah and she straddled me and kissed my lips ad eyebrows and hairline. I groped her back and ass and her goodie with all my fingers and pulled Baby Sarah tight to my waist to see Small Pope beaten down with a kick to his neck. In the Gut. In the Cock. And then Small Pope down on all fours scrapped to the bone. I saw him from behind the windshield glass roll onto his side.

Baby Sarah told me not to stop doing’ what I was doing’ to her.

“Do you hear?” She sighed into my ear, her fingers twisting around my MAN BONE. Did I hear the dirty river?

“YES.”

“Do you?”

“Oh yes, ma’am.”

OSCEOLA. That garden/nesting place of our Youth had a Super 8 motel and a Main Street with a Dairy Queen next to a Fabric and Yarn Shoppe. Population in the low hundreds depended mainly on the shift in the seasons. Two branched

banks and a feed store and THE LARGEST TRUCK STOP IN THE WORLD off I-80 two miles south of us and a two-waitress Pancake Shop with old maps and Tug-Fest flyers in the windows six years older and up comprised the bulk of my small town Iowa cancer along with the Gas Hawk, Jim Bobcat's Catfish House, a Kum 'N Go, and The Pearl. Spacious fields of farmland measured old age and economics and the bird populations. Never underestimate the growth of sparse willow and maple trunks, roads paved and graveled. The nuance of the prairie existed along the sides of the roads and in a few corner fields not used for corn or soybeans or grazing. In the asthmatic squeal, *keeer-r-r* [slurring downward] of a Red-Tailed Hawk, still immature, her round tail a muted gray, kneeling in a prairie grove, you understood the aria between the GODDAMN BEST SOIL THIS SIDE OF THE WORLD and the Mississippi's downriver flow. Had a blood thirst that soil; anything grew up tall. SAVE YOUR PRAIRIE and WILDFLOWER TESTING AREA signs ran and posted route 61 as if one person was expected to save the soil. To be blunt and honest, the soil had the grandeur of expectation. Soil not expected to slide or twirl away with a tornado or another D-Day. With only one stoplight the Osceola high basketball team was not good enough to get past the regional. Men with no teeth muttered, "Keep it Simple," to the young and dying farmers who had visions of black mountains and polar bears sipping Coca-Cola. Us damn kids smoked too much fucking ditch weed. Women ate pork in the mornings with a spoonful of mustard in the center of their plates. We needed love, too. And then see for yourself. Believe it with your own eyes. April showers brought Mayflowers. March lions, lambs. Please. Stop talking

about the weather. We did away with the weathermen and meteorologists who never knew a high-pressure system from their tiny cocks in the bathtub drain. Ridiculous, that weather. No one could stand it, sense anymore. The heat and the wind and the rain and the drought, thunderstorms and the floods. Please. Talk about execution. Please. Execution works.

“Stop,” I heard Baby Sarah tell me after I came. “And drive.”

“I really heard it,” I told her as I threw the Celica into reverse so to not watch Small Pope. Baby Sarah pulled her knees to her chest. Wrapped her arms around her bare shoulders and laughed so hard she couldn’t breath so hard I felt betrayed so hard she told me, “It ain’t worth a damn to believe.”

WE LEFT SMALL POPE CURLED ON THE WET AND SHIVERING PAVEMENT WITH CLINT AND GARNEY SHADOWBOXING IN THE STREETLIGHT. Baby Sarah said, “These are Jail Smokes,” and handed me a Virginia Slim.

I wondered, “Thought they was Bitch Smokes?”

“Let’s not talk,” she said as I drove her home.

When I told Baby Sarah, the Surveyor of Youth, the Protector of Dreams, in that dress with that hair and eyeliner torn from place, “Good luck with ME-LA-NO,” as she climbed out of the Celica, Baby Sarah took the wine/water glasses out of her purse and clinked them together before she set them on the passenger seat and said, “You say that to a lady?”

“I say that after you sucked on me like you did. I’ll be around, ya know,” I said. “Don’t look too hard.”

“You, too.”

And what do you say when *that* happens? Not, “love you.” Not, “What Happened With You?”

THE LIGHTS DON’T SLEEP. The same damn night Daddy had to leave for Arizona and Spring Training. For the last five years Daddy threw for the Iowa Cubs, a Triple A club out of Des Moines, subsidiary and pasture land of the Chicago Cubs for young talent and old man salaries.

“Wrigley field gone meet me soon,” Daddy had said at dinner last night. He told us his night visions been repeating’ again ’bout the same shit.

Said, “It’s me throwing’ in the # 3 roster starter spot for the N.L.C.S. and the outfield is all jungle and amok with Viet Cong and the New York Met’s bullpen sets them jungle trees afire with condoms filled with napalm. Whole time ONLY YOU CAN PREVENT MASS DESTRUCTION flashes on the scoreboard projection screen.”

In baseball-speak Daddy was known as SMOKEY THE THROWER.

Why he left so goddamn early for Spring Training in the middle of December when pitching camp didn’t start until March/April made sense if ya thought ’bout the Arizona humidity. Daddy said the humidity messed with his curve and put too much natural movement on his fastball that he’d walk every

goddamn batter if he didn't have his good stuff. Had a mean slider, the man did. Hell of a knuckler and a change, too.

"Give me thirty-five, sixty-five chance to move up this year," he told Big Sarah, his wife and my mother, last night. "Move us up to Chi-Town and outta this mess."

"I like this house," Big Sarah said.

"It leaks," I told momma.

Daddy put his money down not on tables but on me and Big Sarah. But I really think it was the pull of the palm trees and cacti songs and something 'bout the dry air and the soft water machines in that Southwestern soil that made him leave so early.

And stay.

"He'll be back," Big Sarah told me as I dried the dishes. She washed the dishes so clean Big Sarah only wagered on them sure things. "He did like the year we married in Calumet City."

Because Arizona ran away with most Daddies in Osceola, might be a too much to say NONE OF US KIDS IN OSCEOLA HAD DADDIES because of that goddamn state. But if the Osceola fathers didn't run to Arizona, they sure scampered gone for that same feeling.

Small Pope's Daddy, after his pig farm went under, joined Willie Nelson as a roadie.

I liked to think Daddy and Big Sarah made serious and drunken love that night like giraffes when I came home from MORP and Baby Sarah. Seemed like

only in the winter did Daddy and Big Sarah have that blood thirst, that wall-to-fist pounding love for each other that kept my ass up all night.

I parked the Celica a block away from the split-level house 'cause I was late, out past curfew and Big Sarah didn't love me kindly when that happened. Polluted snow dripped off the roof of our split-level and inside water leaked from the ceilings into Tupper wear bowls and onto the stovetop and knife rack. The water had dripped for the past two days.

I saw Big Sarah in a denim skirt on the porch complaining as I kept my feet light in the muddy yard next door, "And don't come down until it's right 'cause it ain't."

I heard Daddy say, "Fuck a ladder," and, "Fix the damn roof perfect. Fuckin' Goddamn PERFECT?"

I crouched down by the burning bushes covered in ice and snuck to the side of the house. If they saw me I'd have no alibi. I squatted down under the side porch as Daddy walked right by me so damn close I could touch his face almost. Daddy walked like the last man in Iowa to know what a man meant to the soil with his chest stuck out like tits and his gut sucked in tight wearing only a white undershirt and sweat pants. Must've been 25 degrees out that night and I knew Daddy never felt cold. He was only two feet away from me, carrying the essential baby blue duffle bag of tools and a Hurricane malt liquor forty ounce.

"Need a damn ladder," I saw him mouth, his banshee breath a strutting' hot. And he went to the garage and grabbed a ladder and climbed up onto the roof. Scooted around on his bum, the backside of those sweatpants worn and out,

and pounded down nails with the hammer echoing into the aluminum-sided split-level.

In the high dark oaks thousands of migrating black birds swam on ice branches.

Silver pines and dogwoods swayed with a wind that meant snowfall.

The pressure on Daddy's lower back was obscene and hunching. Wicked dust and near black glitter clung to his forearms. And I coughed. The live birds jolted and a strong frontal gust made the blackbirds scatter and screech, bark and howl, yowl, bay, wail, and shriek. I heard Daddy stop pounding'. He wasn't the man to smack ya with a hammer when you had done fuck up.

"Get up here, Rig."

"Sorry," I said when I made it up the ladder.

"You say 'I apologize.' Never say YOU'RE SORRY 'cause that means YOU are SORRY. And I'll be damned."

He handed me the Hurricane and went back to pounding' nails.

Daddy had his codependent streaks with Big Sarah, enabling her sleeping around 'cause he was never home. Had his car phone bills from calling scouts in Chicago and Cincinnati about moving' up to the Big Leagues, illusions of love, O.C.D., S.A.D., grocery lists to make, subscriptions to *Playboy* and constant masturbation to feel good about himself, the bad meatloaf and burnt fried chicken to look forward to in Arizona smorgasbord restaurants, gossip Big Sarah spread that his pecker had fallen off, but he pounded them roofing' nails home.

"You're eye's twitching'," Daddy said to me. "Like a little damn pelican."

“Me?”

“Drink up,” he said and put the hammer down and told me as he’d done before that he believed in comparing apples to oranges. Bone and feather. Had my first taste of malt liquor that night and my cherry broken and the last talk about what DARK meant and what DARK looked like when everything in the night the blackbirds the melting snow clouds all gray and the light posts and the farmhouse lights across the fields left on all night ‘cause farmers in Osceola tended to sleepwalk.

“It’s a goddamn mess,” Daddy said. “I don’t get this up year your mother’s gone find somebody else who will.”

But how wrong Daddy had the DARK. While Big Sarah sat at the kitchen table smoking, her eyesight drawn to the serpentine scratches in the wooden floor, none of the light from across the field came in the windowpanes to illuminate three months of dirt and dust and crumbs in large squares on the floor, while the blackbirds called the names of Aaron and Suzy while blackbird shit hit the ground so white while I only thought of Small Pope kicking’ my ass when he gets up from the pavement. ‘Cause ON A WINTER NIGHT LIKE YOU’RE GONE FEEL LIKE ME UP ON THAT ROOF A LITTLE DRUNK AND NOT KNOWIN’ WHAT YOU DONE.

Or how to get down.

Daddy and me in the summer used to get up on the roof to clean the gutters with the garden-purple hose. We used to spend Friday afternoons chopping’ two or three cords of wood and then cleaning the split-level for Big

Sarah so Daddy could say, "Doll, you and me gone get a good fix on."

The neighbors had stopped watching us stand on the rain gutters looking past our noses to scratch for the invisible ladders and tight ropes hidden in the Stratosphere. To erase the risks of that kind of flight 'cause how else you gone get down since it ain't gone snow when the weathermen say.

No SNOW. Eleven inches might've fallen sometime that night to cover the soil but I don't know what to think 'bout them things.

"Fuck the ladder," he told me. "Don't let your mother, you know."

Daddy used to say the trick was to hit the ground and roll. The frozen soil could break an ankle after a good twenty-foot drop.

"Stay outta the minors, Rig. Even Triple A's gone ruin the knees. Never, don't throw smoke if the mound ain't level, but hell --" Daddy said that night I gave all I had to Baby Sarah and worse to Small Pope and if by that time I didn't understand the dirty river, then I would never understand YOU.

-- Listen, Rig. Some days are diamonds and some days are stones."

"I know."

"How can you?" Daddy touched the back of my rented tux, wrinkled and half on, "Took me 37 years to even think straight," and he led me out to the rain gutter's edge with the live birds in the branches and the ground still somewhat warm to show me how we all really fall.

**DONNY THE ICEBREAKER AND BAD ASS SURPRISE THE QUIET
WITH ERECTIONS.**

1

“Have I said enough?” Donny begins, his fleshy toes touch, connect to the particle board stage, “Is the appetite burning somewhere within? I will not answer your questions.”

Donny, never one to feel or be alone on stage with a Budweiser large-mouth unsettled on the podium, his purple sweatpants, and Chicago Cubs ball cap on his skull. With the Three Wise Men in three shot glasses under the mike, he pits out in his SLAYER t-shirt. To perspire. Oh! To perspire alone!

Why he enters these open-mike contests no one out of the spotlight or of correct mind can understand, or think better. Better to think of chicken bones and yeast infections or, GODDAMMIT! Safety, the bonds of marriage. Avoid the fears in common with loving and none returned. “Today,” Donny continues, “I have my own Q and A to bring to light. No one, I am beyond sure, here, has even thought to read Barthelme. So I will consider you all mute, infected with the institution of writing, i.e. workshops, seminars, issues of TOUGHNESS, SENTIMENTALITY. No, see, we are here to praise the union of the cynical and the ironic. To praise our lofty and easy lives as White Anglo Saxon Protestant rich kids, the fortunate and spoiled, unable to aid society in its mission, unwilling to procreate for the survival of our loving kind. Sad. As Mr. Barthelme has

written, “The self cannot be escaped, but it can be, with ingenuity and hard work, distracted. There are always openings, if you can find them, there is always something to do.”

“Thus we gather to read our absolute and pathetic dung. I do not want your daughters or your haircuts or your hands, gothic in bad taste. I am not tempted by ordinary sin but by the ordinary itself. Try, bitch, to temp me. And be prey to the banal.”

Outside the spotlight, Donny’s shadow on a wall, there are some jeers, some lewd satires, but mainly the confusion of the absolute crap Donny brings to light: John Barth writes that, “*In your collective headlong flight toward oblivion [Alice reads], there are a few among us still, remarkably, who take time out from time to time to read a made-up story. Of that small number, dear present reader, you are one.*”

“Resist the need,” Donny tells *them*; possibly Us; those ridiculous few who flock to and for the sentence to change a life, to make the grave mistake of attempting to understand the world through literature, which, is a very treacherous occupation. These are not my words, “Resist the need to daydream ’cause I myself have a dual nature. I have a penis.”

Donny stands before you. Us. And pulls down his purple sweatpants to reveal, besides the unfortunate fact that he wears no tighty-whities, a pretty decent, smiling erection. Giggles. Jeers. Jimmy Dean sausage link. WE cannot contain ourselves. To watch this man with erection, surprising the quiet.

His paper, his words, are before us. Donny’s penis asks the questions.

Q. Donny the Icebreaker . . .

A. Yes.

Q. What has happened to the world of fiction?

A. Obviously, I know. We lost faith in Yeats, yes Yeats. The year 1983 when the feminist critic, Joyce Carol Oates, led the case for the prosecution in the rather eloquent paper, “At Least I Have Made a Woman of Her,” which examined

— Q. No, Donny. Fiction!

A. Let me explain, dearest, as I said, which examined English literature’s patriarchal demand for women to be nothing more than gentle, protected helpmeets of their spouses. Oates also singled out the contempt for Yeat’s wish that his daughter grow up to be courteous rather than cleaver, and beautiful, but not too beautiful” (*Yeat’s Ghost*, Brenda Maddox 1999).

Q. But Yeat’s is a poet.

A. The man had a great sense of abundance, in his words, “more (abundance) than I have had for years. Ghosts have educated me.”

Q. But fiction?

A. You mean Biction, the newest arrival to the fiction scene. Biction is the union of fiction and Bitch writing. Of course, I can explain. I have my short definition already, succinctly prepared, which relates to, and ideally concerns the (in)adequacy of Modernist history and the explanation of modern art in general, and of Abstract Expressionism and its legacy in particular.

Q. I want a blonde tonight, Donny. Can ya feel me?

A. Man of little circulation, your needs will be met, let me shortly

conclude that it can be argued that art history is a practice of representation. In painting, particular signifying systems, codes and expressive means are used; in art history, or art criticism, the system is language with all its powers.

Q. Donny? What the fuck?

A. History entails a process of transforming given and inherited raw materials. The critical theory we now call 'Modernism' was elaborated at the same time that Abstract Expressionism was produced and ratified. Like Freud says, "But whoever, in desperate defiance, sets out upon (the) path of happiness will as a rule attain nothing. Reality is too strong for (her). (She) becomes a mad (woman)." And the dominance of Modernism, the massive growth in entrepreneurial dealership, the statue and function of museums in the mould of the Museum of Modern Art New York, the idea and reality of the 'Cold War', the role of imperialist ideology in the formation of a particular social matrix and culture in America and its perceived allies; these have been the sorts of connections made, so much the same with fiction.

Q. I'd rather you read a poem, anything --

A. Take Alfred H. Barr Jr.'s *Cubism and Abstract Art* model which implicitly or explicitly, is a linear and intentionalist flow diagram, and can inform us much. (Jackson) Pollack's work of the 1940s and particularly his 'drip paintings' were explained in terms of an extension of Barr's model; Pollack was characterized as essentially taking on the formal and technical problems of both the 'abstract and rational' trend and the 'surrealist and irrational'. . Ah, you want a poem, "Aha! At the intersection of / the Visible-Invisible, / Past the lost dog

hair, / Past the solitary sugar comb: / There! With your pants down. / Clutching your mouth in horror. / Without a shadow of a doubt / The indistinguishable you” (Charles Simic). So what we have is the preponderance of objects drawn from a personal and artistic world (which) simply means that the personal and aesthetic contents of secular life now condition the formal character of art, of fiction, of us, finally, as writers.

Q. What is it you want, seriously, of fiction or anything? Donny the Icebreaker.

A. Give me a hug; leave me the fuck alone.

2

Bad Ass groans, distracted. Even in the silence before applause, that kind innuendo, herpes itch, kingdoms grow new virgins, and there is no mask. That moment of pause or stillness, whether the hands clapping like rotten fish are out of courtesy or genius, most of us enter stillness. Bad Ass groans, refuses to read. Not ready to follow Donny into those thorn bushes of mock immortality, “That stage is the masky-mask,” he thinks. “Manifests images of pretty green teddy bears in the pupils of bony sluts. Go masks. Go Donny! Breathe. The air is good; the sluts are gooder.” Someone calls his name: Bad Ass. “Bad Ass,” he hears. “Batter up.” But he doesn’t move, cannot. Sluts eye him, “Oh yeah,” Bad Ass wants to say. “You want me. You better want me. I. Have a cock. Not like Donny, he still has his freshman penis. I. Have a woman-swallowing cock. And

it's big, oh yeah. I've seen it." One of the Speakeasy kids shakes his head, calls for the next reader. Bad Ass laughs, ha HA. Takes out his paper upon which he thought to read today. He is better than all: HA ha, although his work, "Girls in Iowa" may've won the contest, may've beat out Donny the Icebreaker and his unbelievable routine. Maybe not. Bad Ass alone in the corner of the unlit room. Bad Ass alone drinking. Bad Ass alone hiding not only fear but also his love for, "Wait," Bad Ass stands. "I will read. I must." Giggles. Hoots. Jeers. Bad Ass rises before you now 'cause he understands. Understands what the great Japanese film director Akira Kurosawa said, basically, that to be an artist means never to avert your eyes. And that may be the hardest thing for us to do, because we want to flinch. The artist must go into the white-hot center of himself or herself and look because our impulse was we get there is to avert our eyes. "What I have for you today," Bad Ass speaks, "Is something I am troubled with. Girls in Iowa. Small talk in Iowa avoids topics like God, why read Denis Johnson, V.D., grunts in tune to desperation and eye-popping loneliness, KISS cover bands, relationships, alcoholism and addiction (regarding rehabilitation vs. active use,) any Beat Generation Jazz Poet, phone solicitation and or www.gay.com, word play in which if you divide the word *antspray* you can arrive at the phrase *ants pray*, life changing epiphanies, car crashes, real estate, precocious / surly Creative Writing Professors still hard at work using profanity, in obscurity, not getting laid by undergraduates, shunning reader alienation, shunning improper grammar, shunning young writers, shunning the better art: Poetry, pushing arc, pushing Flannery O'Connor, Henry James, Chekhov, and other writers I'd rather commit

hate crimes against than have to read again, pushing *the way a story should be told*, eating McDonald's French fries after sex, the tobacco industry, truth vs. art, Republicans: *You tarred-and-feathered ass-fucking clowns*, language of the heart, the language of real men, Deconstruction, Feminist Criticism, Jasper Johns, Charlie Brown and Snoopy at his typewriter, "It was a dark and stormy night . . .," Memphis, Tennessee, Birmingham, Alabama, and intelligent conversation. Fuck that. Too much has been said about that already, in paperback. Girls in Iowa have corn and weather. All they want to know is how the corn is doing, might do, and should be doings. And whether they need an umbrella in the morning or flip-flops for hazy after hour parties. Girls in Iowa have large organs and simple desires. Hollywood sex will never compare to the good Iowa corn fuck. That said, enough with telling stories."

No applause.

Silence.

Bad Ass leaves the mike and steps down to let us tell our war stories. And one girl, one sweetheart, the only beautiful girl in the room, approaches him. Bad Ass can hear Donny sobbing in the background, his youth torn of invisible cloaks. This girl takes Bad Ass's hand and kisses him. Bad Ass, stupid with love, whips out his cock. So confused. His cock may as well be his heart. "It's nice," she says, this sweetheart. Bad Ass thinks about his heart, about his story, "It is," he says. "Tell me I am not alone."

TERMINAL

Jaime the Rambo's bathroom is our NEVER NEVER LAND. The *Rocky IV* and *Rambo II* posters above her toilet and the cardio-kickboxing gloves she uses Wednesday night at the YMCA make us proud to be American children. Her medicine cabinet over the sink, a minefield of diet nutrients reminds us a home life built to include Good Looks, Healthy Teeth and Gums. Up on our tip-e-toes, peering into this, Jaime the Rambo's Kellogg Ave. bungalow, we are not here to act as vandals or to make light of our camaraderie. We are the Guardians of Youth, the Protectors of Dreams. We are here to study again and again our Jaime the Rambo, her nightlife at home with her boyfriend, Cy.

Yes, we may be young, bumbling juvenile children with parents. Yet only our parents are bound to fail. OPERATION NA-NA-NA must run smooth, so far is on task. We have not yet been made. And to clarify: OPERATION NA-NA-NA does not deal with Toms, is not below spying or the many forms of espionage our parents seem gullible to. Us kids are no joke. OPERATION NA-NA-NA requires patience, requires us committed just as sacrifice requires marriage. Tonight, in through the bathroom window our eyeballs do not reckon love runs vast or earsplitting. Tonight, we cannot recall a more charming night than this to complete our field data for our upcoming first Self-Help/ Metaphysical text: *How To Never, Ever Grow Up*. Tonight is also a school night.

Our literary agent, he is a slimy bitch of man, but he is grateful nonetheless

Random House, they are sucker bitches, too. Sucker bitches that question motives literary or not. We told Random House to fuck dick. Their publishing Babylon is dead. And yes, shitty sluts — We swear. So does your mother.

It was Knopf who bought our *How To*. Knopf does not care that we are minors. To quote many of our father's favorite comedians, Oh, Knopf, if only money was a dick.

"Time, boys," we shout at eleven sharp. "Quick, positions."

Tonight the agenda requires us to gather conclusive data for the last chapter of our text, a chapter under the working title of '*What We Wish Was True Here: Subjective Monomania on a theme by Peter Pan.*' Our Staff Secretary, who takes cover behind the magnolia in the side yard, he's a snot-nose fat kid, but his chapter titles run flawless.

"All clear," we shout. "Deploy the honky mother."

Honky Mother, let us say, is our fancy listening-through-brick wall thingamajig. The local Radio Shack is a kind, generous sponsor. BUY RADIO SHACK reads the stickers on our Huffy dirt bikes. BUY HUFFY reads our underpoos.

REPORT # 1: In the living room, Jamie the Rambo says to Cy, her boyfriend, possible husband-to-be, "Bruno is my wittle wabbit, not yours."

Our Staff Secretary records this reconnaissance in his FIVE-STAR notebook. The FIVE STAR people do not sponsor us. Why that is I cannot say,

but we agree with Jamie the Rambo, our sweet-ass momma: Bruno is hers.

“Bruno,” Cy says from the loveseat, “is not yours.”

Bruno is Jamie the Rambo’s pet rabbit. Bruno is darling. Jamie the Rambo has an incredible body and an outstanding ass.

We call her Jamie the Rambo because her love for Mr. Sylvester Enzo Stallone, *the Italian Stallion*, the man allegedly who wrote the first *Rocky* screenplay in three days, is such a great explosion of love it cannot be broken down and put back together. There may be some doubt however as to whether or not Sylvester Enzo actually wrote his first *Rocky* in three days, but who the fuck cares. Great explosions of love make us happy. And this ‘great love’ is no recent development. Hence to call ‘Jamie the Rambo’ anything but ‘Jamie the Rambo’ will make us derelicts, unstable possibles given to eating zit-food late into the hard cold places of night, hard and so cold that hard cold night that our proud mothers’ cannot rescue us from. Our proud mothers’ respect us without ever saying so for never once misrepresenting the truth. Thus we have to honor our proud mothers who know deep down that we are not honor students, who know even deeper that we will probably never graduate something as ‘neat’ as college and will therefore never ever be members of Sigma Tau Delta, that nasty undergrad literary club abbreviated STD for good reason. College, our proud mothers remind us, is a joke. And Honor societies, our mother’s say, are jokes that get the shit kicked out of them by other jokes.

Cy, the boyfriend, is also a joke. Is a jealous, lonely man who is really jealous of Bruno the rabbit’s cuteness, Bruno’s the rabbit’s pebble-sized crapper.

Cy's jealousy is a reason why he is not a BIG ASS man. Oh, Cy is a BIG man with an extra big ASS, but Cy does not have the required 'tender heart' to be a BIG ASS man. Being a man with BIG ASS and no 'tender hearts' is a man who may score a feel of poon, but he is a man who will also and without fail always lose that poon. Non-BIG ASS men like Cy leave gals like Jamie the Rambo for girls named Maureen or Debbie or Leslie: girls no good for poon. Only our fathers and Stallone are BIG ASS 'tender heart' men.

Of course, it is obvious and unfortunate that Stallone isn't as good looking as our fathers' because our fathers' do not have the crooked eye or the drooping lower lip or the pleasantly slurred speech of all people, according to our mothers', who love dogs. We do not and cannot blame Stallone's speech problem on Stallone himself like our mother's might blame all people who love dogs for being really not fun to look at. Stallone's most hideous flaw was caused by a forceps accident during his birth, his *birth* that severed a facial nerve. According to our mothers: All people who love dogs had no such thing bad happen as a 'forceps accident' to cause them to love dogs therewith people who love dogs make us very sick and tired of living every minute of our lives with these kind of people.

Also: it must be stated that Jamie the Rambo and Stallone actually are in love. This makes us so happy. If we did not learn along the way in our research the greatness of a man like Stallone or how Stallone was stepping into take care of our Jaime the Rambo, we would have broken cover long ago and revealed ourselves to her so as to break Cy's kneecaps, shave his eyebrows off his face and

tell him to take his BIG-literal-ASS far away off a fucking pier or whatever it will take to keep our Jamie the Rambo happy. Also: Jaime the Rambo and Stallone are in love with each other together. If we did not know that Stallone was stepping into take care of her, we would have broken cover long ago and revealed ourselves to Jamie the Rambo so as to break Cy's kneecaps, shave his eyebrows off and tell him to take his BIG ASS far away off a pier, you fucker, or whatever it takes to keep our Jamie the Rambo happy. Gal's like Jamie the Rambo need BIG ASS men. We do not know if Stallone will show up tonight in his Benz, but he might. He did not show up last week and we really wanted his goddamn autograph, and permission to quote him in the How To. On a phone tap we gruelingly set up, Stallone beautifully hit upon the essence of last weekend's chapter report titled, with no hesitation, 'Masturbation, Grrrrrrrrrr,' stating, "Once in one's life, for one mortal moment, one must make a grab for immortality; if not, one has not lived." True goddamn words, you pots. Who could ever say this icon, debased in the intellectual milieu, was a man beneath the feelings of the Peter Pans to-be? The flesh of Rocky Balboa, the man named 'Most Likely to End up in the Electric Chair' in his high school annual, is the flesh of us. THE GUARDIANS OF YOUTH, THE PROTECTORS OF DREAMS. Cy knows Jaime the Rambo is having an affair with Stallone 'cause Sly was in the Des Moines area last month shooting a film about Iowa girls, a film called *Iowa Girls Have Corn and Weather*, and the Register ran a photo of Stallone and Jaime the Rambo feeding each other fried chicken on page C1 at Murdock's Bistro downtown. Cy pinned the picture to the refridge and Jaime the

Rambo was caught but not blamed. We don't like the title of Stallone's indie project but we sure love Sly, having had to only forgive him once for *Stop! Or My Mother Will Shoot*. *Judge Dredd* and *Copland*, both stupendously one-thumbers, had moments rivaling *The Postman Always Rings Twice* where Stallone emerged as an on-screen prince. The MERC's father even has copies of Sly's two soft porn films: *Party at Kitty's* and *Studs*.

But please. Respect is short in coming to most.

Jaime the Rambo met Stallone on the set of the *Iowa Girls* flick, now in post-production. She had gone to a downtown shooting to be an extra, and ended up being placed in the bar scene during the opening credits of the film, bending over Stallone's shoulder to refill his pint in accord with a *magnificat* cleavage shot tastefully executed by the DP. Jaime the Rambo as Bar Girl # 2 with her butch, dyke-Nazi haircut in the film that we will call *pretty*, which matches her never-even-once-broken nose so well with that scarf we remember her wearing on her first date with Stallone at the downtown bistro and driving away in her Sunbird, scarf-a-tangling, does not normally have bad hair. The Sunbird is right now parked outside the bungalow illegally with a SORRY GUYS, I'M A LESBIAN bumper sticker on the fender.

Our Staff Secretary, pausing between taking his insane girly girl notes, notices Jimmy, a secondary scout, missing the action. A Twizzler is tossed in his direction. He eats, perks up.

“The Iron Butterfly,” Cy says, resuming, “is all in the wrist.”

Jaime the Rambo flexes her neck and stretches her bulky calves, “Life is *not*, dear man, all *about* you.”

“So fierce,” he responds. “You so fierce, Jaime.”

“What’d I say ‘bout that FIERCE crap!”

“Bruno is a rabbit, honey.”

“Are ya talkin’ or *thinking* aloud to me?” she says. “ ‘Cause my ass hasn’t, HAS NOT even dropped.”

Though Cy has his misgivings, we like him ‘cause tonight he is awake and will remain calm, saying to Jaime the Rambo, “I never said that.”

We like Stallone more than Cy, but we do not know if Stallone is awake or could remain calm here. Cy could have said, “Wrong. I’ve never seen a bigger drop-ped ass.” But Cy, tonight, brushes white cheddar cheese cracker crumbs off his tan blazer and onto his lap, where Bruno, nose-a-twitching, rests on Cy’s designer boxer briefs.

We giggle and sneer. Cy has a real BIG ASS behind. BIG ASS men love the feel of tight fabric when have the Hot Crotch.

“If you like,” Jaime the Rambo says, “Bruno is a sponge.”

Cy, reconsidering an earlier remark, remarks, “*Life?* It ain’t reconstructive surgery. What gives?”

Jaime the Rambo grabs a pair of 7 1/2lb. dumbbells off the floor near the fireplace and says to her BIG ASS giant, “You tease.”

Cy spreads his fingers as Spock might in the original *Star Trek* for

whatever universal reason this curious Vulcan greeting or unfortunate gesture might mean. He whirls his thumb like a tiny vibrator to mimic the action of stimulating the clitoris. Yes. We may be young but our mothers' have vibrators.

Our mothers have clits.

The MERC on our payroll seems to believe that what a woman has between her legs is called a period, or, "that thing at the end of a sentence." We have no record of a *period* being that thing between our mothers' legs, yet our field data cannot verify or dismiss his report. "Guys," the MERC continued, "figure it out. It's black. A period's black. Got to be."

Inside, Cy pouts, "Gosh . . . Gosh."

"I didn't mean it," Jaime the Rambo says, beginning a second set of bicep curls at fifteen reps. Blonde hair falling out a ponytail, her B-O-D shaping an elastic one-piece swimsuit of our granny's generation flawlessly, Jaime the Rambo exhales deeply, throaty, "I have company tonight."

"The movie guy?"

"You know it, babe."

"The movie guy calls you babe?"

And she says to Cy, "Bathe me."

"Then I get the piano," he tells her.

Cy is not a lawyer.

Jaime the Rambo is not a lesbian.

If she were a lesbian, we would have to put her down. We would have to tell her of our field report interviews with men 19 to 35 years in age, wherein one target (Jerome, age 28, House Painter and Freelance Novelist) stated, “You think the vagina is uncomfortable! Imagine the penis on a day you must go Commando apropos a stiff wind.” Jerome was one of many subjects to concur with our feelings of homosexuality. Not that a lesbian has a penis or that a lesbian SHOULD have a penis for convenience, it’s just that, “Lesbians rule, kiddies,” has been reported to us twice in the aforementioned reports. If *Lesbians rule, kiddies* is in any way indicative of men ages 19 to 35, we cannot agree and say “Goddamn right.” These men sure as hell ain’t getting’ laid, and pornographic fantasies, in the least, seem to us crude and malnourished.

If and when we decide to cultivate this position, age to 19 or 35, we surely will want to be getting’ some stanky on our hang-downs.

The MERC tentatively, earlier, took a razor to Jaime the Rambo’s lesbian propaganda bumper sticker. We let him do what he wants. Ignoring his views on child-approved behavior-modified meds ‘cause he’s on quite a high dose. Add to his melancholia a less than keen home life where his mother is a reformed alcoholic *and* an Al-Anon while the stepfather is not above taking in a Budweiser case before noon, MERCs do not like the idea of lesbians as a whole.

MERCs arose our self-pity.

Some people.

Jaime the Rambo ignores Cy’s piano remark and moves onto the pinnacle of her nightly workout: lunges: four sets of twenty.

“Will you stop?” Cy asks bitterly. “Nothing on the earth has to do with your ass. Finito.”

“Finito?”

“Betcha.”

“Conditionally you can leave me,” she says. “The condition requiring you to bathe me with Bruno.”

Bruno twitches his darling wabbit nose.

We know the piano is in storage somewhere in West Des Moines, in the Industrial Park, and that the piano is valued at \$21,000.00. We know Cy is leaving her, but not until he secures the whereabouts of the piano upon which he makes his living as a Junior High music teacher/composer. Yes. Cy will have to quit this nonsensical talk if he wants that ugly-ass piano back. He is a BIG ASS man. BIG ASS men do not concern themselves with talk of grand pianos. We do not want Cy to be a choirboy.

“Then I get Bruno, the security deposit,” Cy says.

“You can have me on a silver platter, ankles in a bow behind my head if you want.”

“Jaime.”

“You understand **CONDITIONALLY**?”

Cy lifts Bruno to his face and speaks to the little man, “Wittle Boo-no want bathy bathe or a healthy relationship wif healthy mate not having’ affairs wif Sylvester Stallone? What’s wit woo want?”

And he shouts damn, “Goddamn damn me.”

Tonight Cy has the Hot Crotch. To treat the Hot Crotch, Cy automatically, every 7 minutes, tucks his hand into his boxer briefs and rubs said hand vigorously into and around his nut sack. He then removes the hand with a dart-throwing motion and smells it wherein that species of Hot Crotch, occurring regularly with an obsession, smells of *Obsession* cologne. *Obsession* as a prevention tactic against Hot Crotch is an option as is *Ben Gay* or *Olive Oil* or *Prescription Vinegar*, which was applied by Cy last weekend on an order from the doctor/practitioner person we do not know but should get the name. The vinegar did not work well then according to the sting and watery look in his eyeballs. Cy didn't even know how it was supposed to work, never asked the doctor/practitioner a single question. We will ignore any matter regarding tolerance or faith or of a spiritual condition. We will accept medical diagnosis as truth and worry later. Yet as vinegar or any optional treatment appears useless and sad, Jaime the Rambo has/had not minded the smell or taste in our three months of surveillance. She likes Cy. And we like Cy. Although we can no longer refer to him as a BIG ASS man since he applies a ratty/industrial cologne to his gentlemen, Cy is a CHOIRBOY.

Yes. If the shoe fits. There is nothing Cy can do to prevent his Hot Crotch besides a shower and LAVA soap.

Since Cy is leaving Jaime the Rambo and had the balls to tell her, "It's not you, it's Debbie Dallas," she does not want Cy to use her shower or her LAVA. Nevermind that Cy does or did pay half the rent to live indoors with his fiancée, he has no right, even at Jaime the Rambo's request, to do so.

CHOIRBOYS do not deserve to shower and LAVA.

And Cy does not care; he shivers. The shower is a piece of shit. We have a nice view of the shower with no shower curtain.

We are interested only in our jollies.

Only if the shoe fits. Yes.

Jaime the Rambo completes her lunges and her very attractive buttocks glisten where her skin meets the orange of her swimsuit. She then executes 100 abdominal crunches and 25 gut busters. Getting up from the floor, she grabs Bruno out of Cy's lap and wipes her forehead clean of sweat and worry with Bruno, and carries him into the bathroom.

Cy turns on the radio.

The volume is WAY up 'cause Janis J. is on. No one we know actually likes Janis except for CHOIRBOYS like Cy. We do not like Janis and we care about people.

We do not care about musicians, drug addicts, reformed alcoholics, plumbers.

Cy scratches his balls and shouts, "I want the goddamn piano."

"Who paid for it?"

"Shit."

"Bathe me or stay."

Cy tells himself aloud, "Me smell."

"You can come in the shower," Jaime the Rambo says. He sits upright in the loveseat and checks his Hot Crotch again. Fair to bad, he concludes with a

shoulder shrug, “No shower for me. It ain’t *that* bad.”

But it is.

Our primary scout reports that Jaime the Rambo is now naked in the bathroom.

Oy. Gad. BOOM BOOM.

Cy looks down the length of the rigid hallway to the bathroom doorway where Jaime the Rambo stands with her hands on her hips and her legs spread shoulder width apart. No Camel Toe or Yeast Infection to treat with vinegar or *Obsession* for our gal. Bruno hops behind her on the linoleum.

“Can I please have the piano?” Cy whines. His right leg is asleep.

“If you’re thinking,” she says, her voice deep, giving us surreal BONERS, “you can somehow avoid this, and you have to stay.”

We smile. Cy says, “Wha’? I don’t want you.”

Jaime the Rambo turns around and mocks Cy by bending over and slapping her asscheeks as if she were our age, and like us, mooning the southbound barges on the Mississippi river. Yes. That is where we are from, that dirty river. Pathetic river towns. Which is why we have our parents’ drive us to Des Moines and drop us at the Skate Land under the guise that we have pretend girlfriends inside. Horrible is the Mississippi river valley where we are bred to grow up with nothing to do. God forbid we moon barges and slap our asscheeks until we turn 21, which is what will happen. Or not. Hell nah. The Guardians of Youth, the Protectors of Dreams will never taste alcohol legally, unlike our parents’, who sit, as we speak, in a comfortable Donut Shop and lounge with the

other people in Des Moines who like to get fat. And this CONDITIONAL business of Jaime the Rambo's, honestly, she should at least receive some satisfaction before Cy leaves. To ask for a bathing could almost become an act of atonement for Cy. But the man is a PUSSY. Man cheats on his fiancée with a woman named Debbie Dallas and cannot even take care of his Hot Crotch.

Cy. You PUSSY.

"I FUCKING GET IT," CY WAILS WIKE A WITTLE GIRL. "YOUR ASS WILL NEVER DROP."

"It already has, boyfriend."

Cy is disgusted and he waggles his BIG ASS into the kitchen where he tells himself he will never again call her FIERCE or call her from a pay phone outside of Eagle market after nine at night to as if he can come over *to borrow an egg*, which is a code we have broken, which is to mean *have sex*, completely normal dirty but not too dirty, comfortable with their bodies sex that can last over 23 minutes if Cy does not strap one of Jaime the Rambo's hair ties around his gentlemen. We know Cy will not get the sex. Hot Crotch and Debbie Dallas will ruin his chances. He will get an egg; an egg of Jaime the Rambo's to crack open and suck down raw.

He tells himself, reaching above the stove and taking down a bottle of Merlot, "I will not bathe the rosy cunt. Finito."

Yes.

We will play Duck Duck Goose with our eyeballs close and our sugarcoated teeth glowing; our clean nostrils open if and whenever there is sex.

Our MERC, a poor loser, loses every time we play. Unfortunately now, the MERC trips on a stone-carved rabbit carelessly placed in the yard for aesthetic reasons as if landscape architecture is quaint vandalism. And since our MERC likes to throw rocks at the neighboring houses, we may have to pay him more than pictures of our mothers' panties.

We cannot stop the bastard from chasing squirrels either.

Jaime the Rambo enters the shower and we watch her. She sings that song -- in the category of House Disco, played regularly before all Chicago Bulls games -- we love, "Na na NAH Na, na na NAH NA, hey hey hey. GOODBYE," until she cannot remember how the song goes.

Willy Wonka!

Jaime the Rambo is in the shower. Oh yes very nice. Rub that a little harder. Now lather, girl. Lather. Oh yes very nice.

We ejaculate and feel good about ourselves.

We say, "Smoke on the water, boys."

And as Jaime the Rambo steps out of the shower and towels her immaculate and refreshed body dry, our semen stains the grass.

Our secretary sketches the image of Jaime the Rambo into his notes.

She leaves the bathroom with the towel around her waist. She goes into the kitchen and fills a glass of water. Cy sits on the counter with his hands in his lap, the bottle of Merlot and two wine glasses next to boxer briefs.

"You can't manipulate me," Cy says. "You can tell the truth."

"Debbie is a fatty."

“Be a bitch, then.”

“I’ve seen THUNDER THIGHS IN ALL HER GLORY,” Jaime the Rambo says. “You’ll have Christmas everyday up in that.”

“Vino?”

“Sorry. You missed your chance at the finest piece in Des Moines, good sir.”

“An egg is all.”

Jaime the Rambo lifts her hair off her neck to let the cool bungalow air give her goose flesh, “Stallone wants me. *Me me*. Have your egg.”

“There’s better than wanting you,” Cy says. And we are happy, then worried. Stallone will surely take Jaime the Rambo with him to Hollywood and Los Angeles will offer her mere bit speaking parts in primetime cable films. We hope Stallone is a BIG ASS man and not a CHOIRBOY, of course. But we don’t want him to take Jaime the Rambo away. We believe he will not since after marriages to Sasha Czack, Brigitte Nielsen, and Jennifer Flavin, how can he want another? We know the Los Angeles/Hollywood association will make Jaime the Rambo ugly. Let them girls in Cali get the “Is that *your* ride?” and “My my Hank, tell me about this vagina” speaking parts.

But we cannot stop time or convince grown-ups they are dipshits.

We say, “You do not get what you want. You get what you are given.”

That is not right.

Cy opens the refrigerator and grabs an egg. We duck into a hedge. The sight of a man sucking down a raw egg scares us. Yes. We can be scared. We

are scared of growing up and *Nightmare on Elm Street* films and lead paint and faggots.

We do not like Cy anymore.

Thankfully, Jaime the Rambo does not have ENORMOUS breasts. Women with ENORMOUS breasts scare the shit into our undies. We firmly believe there is no resolve for core issues.

Our primary scout motions that the egg has gone down the hatch.

Jaime the Rambo, not crying, goes, “I should say something that’ll really hurt.”

“You can try.”

“I feel good,” she says.

“Where’s the piano, Jaime?”

She hurries back down the hallway, “Lemme ask Bruno.”

Cy’s, “Goddamn dammit,” roars follow her sweet as, her face pure with freckles but not too many freckles to render her hideous, her thin boyish lips, tarty nose, and B cup breasts. Breasts she hugs with kindness in the bathroom doorway.

“Bruno? What you doing’, silly?”

All we can see of Bruno is his poofy wabbit tail rising over the lip of the toilet bowl. We cannot see them silly wabbit ears.

Jaime the Rambo screams and we are damned.

“I’ve had it,” Cy says, tearing down the hallway, halting in the doorway. Bruno is not moving. “What’d you do?”

“Me?”

“Bruno can’t jump that fucking high.”

“Did he?”

Cy rests his chin on Jaime the Rambo’s shoulder. “Finito,” he drones.

We try not to feel the pain. We will not feel the pain. Bruno is drowned in the toilet flush water. Blame cannot be ours. We split into two squadrons. Squad Alpha moves to the north, to the small kitchen window near a grouping of mature hedges to enhance our view. Squad Omega stays put and prepares maneuvers to record all of Jaime the Rambo’s emotional felicity. Memorandums to EVAC and memorandums to cease any/all masturbatory instincts are in preliminary drawing stages by our staff secretary now hidden under a maple sapling to the southeast. Squad Omega is tense. We swear inside our mouths, “Christ,” and, “Finito.”

If we had not ejaculated could we have saved wittle Bruno?

We must be true to task. The naked, glistening image of Jaime the Rambo confuses us. Her incredible body does not match her stricken face. Mouth agape, shattering us with the sounds of failure, the towel around her waist falls to the linoleum, tainted with Bruno fuzz.

Cy holds Jaime the Rambo from behind, “The piano, Jaime.”

“West 29th. Stickman’s, I think. Yeah.”

“Okay.”

“You know you’d had it with me before you even had it.”

“Okay.”

“Leave now.”

“Debby will take care of me.”

“Then fine.”

Jaime the Rambo grabs Bruno by the tail and pulls the wet wabbit corpse out of the toilet flush water. She wraps him in a face towel and we almost vomit. Bruno’s once joyous, all sensing ears now hang limp. Cy leaves the bathroom ahead of Jaime the Rambo and we are left to watch her conceal Bruno fully within the towel folds. Squad Alpha reports that Cy is filling the wine glasses with Merlot. Jaime the Rambo, we report, does not entertain melancholia or madness. She holds the swaddling bunny corpse to her abdomen and rocks him sweetly.

One of us breaks. Jimmy, son of the Butcher, Baker, and Sausage maker bellows, “I want to grow up. Scared.”

We say, “Shitfuckdamn. Then do it, CHOIRBOY.”

We threaten to erase his memory. To erase the mindscape of Cy and Jaime the Rambo before the SHIT went down. Before the Double D and Stallone walked out from the corn. In memory. Back when we first saw Jaime the Rambo and Cy naked in their animal skins bathing one another for the whole of the corps, our ejaculations shooting crisp, our eyeballs never saw ruin or failure. Yes. *Good* times. Say when, “We have to own the sounds we make,” came from Jaime the Rambo’s lips after that first night of peeking, revelations occurred quickly in our How-To documentation. But Jimmy starts to cry, standing in Jaime the Rambo’s line of sight. Another scream. Christ. Finito. We are made.

Squad Alpha returns to the camp under the bathroom window and reports

that Cy and Jaime the Rambo have moved to the side yard perimeter with Bruno, a flashlight, the bottle of Merlot, an Adidas shoebox (size 9), wine glasses, and a shovel. We say, "Fall back to the hooch."

"Are they coming for us?" Jimmy asks.

No one answers the CHOIRBOY.

We retreat, slowly removing our pre-teen bodies from camp while keeping our *fucking* eyeballs focused on the perimeter where Cy digs the hole. Christ. Our MERC is not retreating. He is holed up behind a magnolia in bloom, fatigues removed, his appendages in a state of turbulent motion.

Unseen headlights begin to frame us as we pull back. Pull. Out.

STALLONE!

The same moment I say, "I'm going' in," we hear the wail of Stallone's horn. The Benz idles and without hesitation -- the need for an autograph -- I dart around the side of the bungalow and there is the MERC alone, beating his meat.

I can't see Jaime the Rambo and Cy digging a shoebox grave for Bruno but I am safe from Stallone's headlights.

Jaime the Rambo must be lovely and naked in the moonlight.

I dart again and flank the MERC. "Ka-coo," I message him. "Ka-coo."

"Smoke on the water, boys," the MERC says. I hear Jimmy in a dirge. Goddamn. His *fucking* tears are *fucking* real.

The PUSSY.

The MERC is squiggling his pants off his knees and upward to his waist. I message him again. He hears me, spots me, and motions me to him. I hesitate. I

fear Stallone's headlights and Cy's shovel, Jaime the Rambo judging me.

The MERC says, "Now, Jon boy."

I bound across the grass and barrel roll my kidneys into the magnolia trunk. The sounds I make are immense, reckless sounds.

"Who's there?" Cy howls.

We can see him inching toward us with the flashlight and shovel. The MERC grabs my hand. I can feel him shiver as I shiver.

Jesus H.

Cy shines the flashlight on the MERC and I can almost see Jaime the Rambo in the periphery of the flashlight beam placing the bottle of Merlot into Bruno's shoebox grave and then covering herself with her veiny, freckled hands.

The MERC squeezes me, bear hugs me as Cy gets to within ten feet of us. Cy drops the flashlight and raises the massive shovel above his head. Jaime the Rambo is in a blind spot and I do not know if she is crying or if I am still hearing Jimmy's pathetic dirge. Goddamn. Stallone, you ruined us. Stallone, you CHOIRBOY.

Cy's shovel thunders down upon the MERC's forehead.

Jaime the Rambo sprints into the bungalow, ass-a-firmly-jiggling. What a beautiful thing to see, once. The MERC mouths to me he will change. Grow up. His hand squeezes my hand so tight I cannot feel his blood in my ear, concealing my eyeballs.

"I should say something that'll really hurt," I tell Cy, who pauses mid-rearing of the shovel to see my eyeballs and my NO FEAR t-shirt.

“Melodrama’ll get you stuck, kid,” he says.

Cy’s shovel crashes down on my shoulder, breaking my collarbone. He digs the blade into my shins. The beating will never quit, even after.

“Take your peeping Tom asses outta here,” he tells us, out of breath.

“That all you got,” I whimper. We, OPERATION NA-NA-NA, have failed. Now reduced to lying as still as prairie wheat, I refuse to count the stars. I refuse to make amends to those I have hurt, to those I will ever hurt. I will not take back a sound I have ever made and I will not make a sound.

“Yeah, it really is. Damn,” he says. Cy takes a seat on the grass with us, rests the shovel against the magnolia and tugs on his boxer briefs. Taking his shoes off and wrapping his tan blazer around the MERC, Cy asks, “How long y’all been out here?”

“Since Debbie,” the MERC says.

Jaime the Rambo looks out the kitchen window. Cy waves to her and she nods with the towel back around her waist, sipping her Merlot.

“Y’all hungry?”

“Don’t say that,” I say. “You CHOIRBOY.”

The MERC rolls on his side, “Damn shame,” he mumbles, licking his fingers clean of semen and spit-up.

“Yeah,” Cy says. “That fucker went about the worse way I know.”

He says, “You boys need better supervision.”

“We are the Guardians of Youth, the Protectors of Dreams,” I say will all conviction.

“That’s a good one, son,” Cy says with the faint crack of an utter happiness.

That should have been enough, goddamn it. To think only Cy was the joke. That the joke on Cy would go ‘What Will Come To Pass?’ Who I am to say? The joke was not wabbit turd, not carbon made diamond and all soft tender among the heap. We *have* to own the sounds we make. Say, “I love you,” and understand. Say, “How well behaved will we have to be to wear the SHIT out?” If what we wished were true here were true, we would have Bunny Wabbits that had not died. Wabbits we fed and loved. Wabbit dung we might trick grown-ups into eating as sorbet or Honey Baked Ham. What will come to pass will pass because of gravity, and we cannot fight gravity. As wabbit shit may be for snacking, not all of us are well behaved. Jaime the Rambo and Cy have not grown up. Are not well behaved. Yet they treated Bruno, the white and tan wittle wabbit like a prince as Cy should treat Jaime the Rambo like a princess because he can. Because he will not or because he does his best, OPERATION NA-NA-NA unfolded to entertain what will come to pass, which is not shit or grown-up *or* that *thing* we do run from. Say, “Fine.” We do the best we can. Say, “Give me a hug; leave me the fuck alone.” Only by watching your failure can we forget that our failure and ruin will happen. Strong conviction will, for most of us, fade (with unforgiving didacticism) into conformity. The joke was not on Cy. The joke was on us. The code could not be cracked, ultimately; it had to be lived.

And all fascination with myth and redemption leads us to believe we are correct, that the fantasies will hold. We *can* hold it. But I apologize, I will make amends. I will resolve. I will sound off at the chance to fail and fail miserably, to resolve that we really do need each other. This, of all things, cannot be faked. What you and I have is terminal.

APOCALYPTIC MULES

Courageous bowels I have. To break wind (fart, rip ass, “Load the cannons!”) in public, which I *really* love to do, is not courage. Singing Black Sabbath’s “War Pigs” and breaking wind (etc.) with a Zippo lighter in close proximity to the releasing orifice of personal gas in public (personal experience & not mine) is something else. Not to say that I cannot call my bowels courageous, I do and can. Saying there is a difference between *having* courageous bowels and *taking the action* to make sure those around you can smell the stink is exactly something else. Exactly where the inspiration for such a bold statement occurs can be traced to two locations 1) the rereading of Louise Gluck’s *Proofs & Theories*, and 2) responding to Personal Ads on the internet, the prompt being, “I’ll tell everyone I know what I’ve done and they’ll all like me.” That was not a good idea. But it is a perfect idea because telling others what they do not want to hear is almost courage, or a form of almost courage and honesty. Telling others you have gone online and responded to 5 maybe 8 Personal Ads summons one of two responses, 1) “I’d never EVER date a guy who does that,” or 2) “That’s sick.” This is good. Tells me I am doing something right. Tells me I am not supposed to do this and keep my mistaken secrets tucked away under the mattress of the Four Apocalyptic Mules.

RESPONDING TO THE UNKNOWN, FEAR OF

The action of responding to Personal Ads via the Internet is a process I do not recommend. As I answered only to those ads with attached photographs under the assumption, on the grounds, that one with the ability to scan photos onto an internet web site defines that person as perhaps 1) having more cash flow (to purchase a scanner) than those ads without attachments, and 2) Mr. Vanity, yes I am. So I responded to two personal ads in the Missoula proper region, state of Montana, of which contain much interest. The first response contained a photo featuring a young, not-an-unattractive thing, sitting on a motel room king-size mattress with a Bud Light in one hand and an unlit cigarette in the other. Adorned in Joe Boxer shorts and pigtails ("What the fuck," I may have said. "Something is very wrong with me. Ha ha, obvious.") my monster-excitement was train-wrecked by the undeniable fact that this girl (as she was nothing less) sought only those males of the ages 17 thru 22, also including therein, one with the capacity *to party*, or as I remember her statement, one who can appropriately, "Throw down." Of the above I am neither. So I poked fun at the necessary, "Nice acne," and, "Superfluous, you are not." Including a rather funny and insightful anecdote about a man searching for the perfect woman, who upon finding the perfect woman, gets dumped by perfect woman because perfect woman was looking for the perfect man (from one of my mother's numerous self-help newsletters.) Second verse same as the first: "Something is very wrong." The second response acted upon was, if nothing more than a curiosity, a housewife. And her attached photo send me to a hideous hot-pink web site

entitled HOT & HORNY HOUSEWIFES, or something to that pornographic effect. Her response to my initial response of, “My name is Estahos. I am the Latin lover you’ve never had,” told me of her husbands’ penile erection complications, and her fantasies involving mutual pigtails. This is where my adventures ended, STOPPED IMMEDIATELY. Bring about what the *Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous* considers, “the hideous Four Horsemen -- Terror, Bewilderment, Frustration, Despair.” Yet these Horsemen, to me, seem too serious, too out in the open. I’d rather my Horsemen be mules, the ‘hideous’ Four Mules of the Apocalypse: Goddammit, Pain, Who gone love me now? and Oops.

S. Freud in his *Civilization and Its Discontents* marks what I consider to be one of the fascinations of the Personal Ad when he states that, “The sexual life of civilized man is notwithstanding severely impaired (61). The Personal Ad network, from my brief experience, is ‘civilized’ in form and extremely straightforward: all about nookie. These women want sex. Wanted my photograph (what Estahos looks like is beyond me.) But even more fascinating to me is the language one encounters when responding to Personal Ads. There is the wonderful abbreviated tone, the anachronistic or short-handed prose, and the *courageous* (in)ability of rending or describing one’s interests, perhaps the self, in as little space as possible. Examples (of my own design) such as:

SWF, N/S, seeking aging man who loves to travel, dine fine, WILL SPEND AS MUCH MONEY AS HUMANLY POSSIBLY ON ME BECAUSE I’VE BEEN LONELY MY WHOLE LIFE, loves puppies (stand. poodle pref.) foreign films & collarbones. No druggies or hippies please.

Or,

SML seeks sugar momma to hold on stormy nights; has experience with mental

disorders. Pl. incl. pic. of ankles & manifesto of slut potential, citing Victorian lit. & Sunday comics as prim. sources. Must own vehicle: BIG ASS truck pref.

In and out of content or context, these Personal Ad placers seem to know exactly what they want. But what is said in Personal Ads deepens the sense of what one might consider a question in prose: What is not said? Or worse, what is said is exactly what one fears and fears to encounter. Whether this encounter registers as seeking the right, perfect mate, that weird other, some tenacity of the vulnerable or sublime; the list is infinity, seeking the fear of the unknown is the practice of answering and placing Personal Ads. The *out of sight, out of mind* sense of communication renders one anonymous, free to explore a range of possibilities. And these possibilities in my mind encounter the ideas of fear and courage.

In the essays “The Idea of Courage” and “Against Sincerity” poet Louise Gluck shows what is at risk when the task of creating a text both courageous and honest occurs. History, personal at best, is a path one may follow in creating art, yet as Gluck states, “the actual making of art is a revenge on circumstance” (25). What is, at best, that of possessing courage, is that which stays above the emotional. The feeling that one is not being tricked but being shown what is not so much honesty as actual. I should say more but I am in awe of the following quotations by Gluck:

The association of truth with terror is not new (34)

The artist’s task, then, involves the transformation of the actual to the true. And the ability to achieve such transformations, especially in art that presumes to be subjective, depends on the conscious willingness to distinguish truth from honesty or sincerity (33)

Intervals of silence, however, require a stoicism very like courage; of (this), no reader is aware (27)

We turn to those who have been dealt, as we see it, roughly the same hand. We turn to see what they’re up to, feeling natural excitement in the presence of what is still

unfolding, or unknown (35).

The line one must cross to be courageous is tricky and smudged and stick drawn. I find all of what Gluck says to be a near truth at the heart of writing leading into life or truth. Courage *is* the purchase of a *Hustler* mag on a busy Sunday morning from an underage convenience store clerk not for the purposes of masturbation, but to see if those Polaroid's of your ex-girl you sent in ("It was a mistake, baby.") made the BARE IT ALL AMATEUR pages. And it is my BOLD STATEMENT # 1 that what one seeks (in life, for happiness, to die) leads one to approach fear, an inevitable path of resistance one cannot avoid. Example: in Karlfried, Graf von Durckheim's prayer, *The Way of Transformation*, he states:

The man who, being really on the Way, falls upon hard times in the world will not, as a consequence, turn to that friend who offers him refuge and comfort and encourages his old self to survive. / Rather, he will seek out someone who will faithfully, and inexorably help him to risk himself, so that he may endure the suffering and pass courageously through it . . . / Only to the extent that man exposes himself over and over again to annihilation, can that which is indestructible arise within him. In this lies the dignity of daring.

Restatement of BOLD STATEMENT # 1: The process of creating a Personal Ad to encounter one's fear, to seek out that path of 'annihilation' *on the page*, is courage. What follows is such the record: let me show you my mules.

To begin the construction of a personal Personal Ad takes, at first, the obvious: I am a Single White Male (SWM.) Yet this is only obvious if you know me or of me, which is a matter of my own confession that everyone *should* know me: "He's so damn weird," or, "That boy ain't good." I flirt. I flatter. What the

fuck: To being with how I want my Personal Ad to run, the following has to be shown: SWM call me Jon. Already there are problems.

NAMING DOWN THE BOY

Introduce me to someone or some body or person snatcher, your wife or husband, etc., and I will not, cannot remember that someone's name. This defect is horrid, horribly defective to the social graces. And if my chance, after an initial introduction, I see this body at a loud bar or run into said body at the grocery in the frozen foods section, which is already uncomfortable, all that goddamn expensive ice cream, you may hear me say, "Hey, man," or, "What's up, Dillspank?" or with the tone parallel to saying, "I had to kill your puppy with my Firestones. The barking," I will jerk pride into the bowels and say, "What's your name again? I'm SOOOOO-SO terrible with names." Unless, by the other chance, that the body resembles a youthful Barbara Streisand (including that lovely, mangled snout), the high school sweetheart, or that of a Greco-Roman mythological goddess, and stellar, dirty-talking' sex in the backseat of a '91 Honda Accord occurs apropos of an introduction, I cannot remember names. Faces, yes. Faces I will fix into the brain like the first sentence of Kafka's "The Metamorphosis." But by remembering faces and not names emphasizes the fact that recognition and identification are two different things. You are a body, a piece of flesh, of ass, nameless.

BOLD STATMENT # 2: Names have weight.

I go by Jon, not Jonathan. Do not associate me with a Jonny or a Jonny B. Good, John Hancock, "John-a-dreams" from Hamlet, "A sleepy fellow" is the translation and translates incorrectly. John F. Kennedy or John Deere (even though I grew up in the heartland of the tractor industry: East Moline, Il.) or Dear John or John in reference to the toilet do not make the connections. Jon Travolta was out of my hands even though the connection is tempting since there is a reference expressed in my Senior High yearbook, "Jon 'Travolta' Hill has no problem dancing by himself," at the Senior Prom drunk and dateless. Those journalist fuckers. John Doe is a maybe. The name is a possible inquiry toward the question of Self and Identity and can be associated with my sad and pathetic existential crises, but the name seem violent, secure, and not conducive to any personal panty crusade. John Updike, John Cheever, John Barth: Shit, no one can wish or press hands together that hard.

If and when I change my name, I want to go as Jon Phoenix or Jon River. River Phoenix is, to me, the name of God. And compliments as a Johnny Depp look-a-like are always forgiven, of course, "You *kinda* look like Johnny Depp," only occurred once. And I had long hair then. And how desperate either party may have been for stellar dirty talking' sex is currently unavailable for critical analysis.

Me personally, as a Jonathan William Hill, which has to be the most English and banal and dissonant name available to the human condition -- Jonathan William Hill as a name or whatever else is appropriate to call me: Ugly, Farm Boy, the kid from Iowa who is not really from Iowa but rather Illinois since

he dislikes any immediate association with Chicago or Rockford (Files) and / or the fact that Illinois was the location of my childhood neighboring Indiana (thank god I wasn't born there as my brother and father were born there as Hoosiers) -- is a name that sticks and stones me.

As a small Jon, the child Jon, my parents used to call me in the crib, J. Willy or J. Willy Wiggle Worm, "Because he likes to wiggle-squiggle-and-squirm." as I continue to do every night before I fall asleep, constantly changing sleeping positions. Call that comfort, if I use comfort not just to describe how I sleep with three pillows under the skull, a pillow between my legs, and the comforter and sheets wrapping me into knots with my dirty-ass feet hanging off the end of the mattress. I cannot blame my parents for J. Willy Wiggle Worm. They were products of their own environments as I was a product of another where the feet need to be cold. The feet need air.

Origin of name: I am named after a bar in San Francisco or Los Angeles where mother and father honeymooned: Jonathan's. This is appropriate and I am wrong about it. Actual origin of name: Batavia, IL, where my mother taught fourth grade before I was born. Her favorite student in the class was this blonde, kiss-ass, Jonathan, who, in her statement, said, "He was always so happy." If I were born female, my name would have been Julie, my mother's favorite female student in her fourth grade class. This is terrifying. Advice: Do not misspell or gravely mistake me for a J-O-H-N. There is only one H in my name, not two. Those who do and have written J-O-H-N on cocktail napkins, D- Shakespeare essays, hospital wrist bands, or did or have ever referenced J-O-H-N as a possible

way to signify my person, gag and limp, limped and gagged with the shame of all their pathetic mistakes and regrets. As I do. But at least I am not inconsiderate.

Nicknames: At Riverdale Senior high in Port Byron, Il.: J. Rock, Jonny Rock, Killroy, Hillroy, Jon Hill, Thirty (30) (Varsity basketball jersey #), Jonny Killroy, Jonny Hillroy and Chest. At Rhodes in Memphis, TN, this kid, Luke from Houston, the man who considered the McDonald's Big Mac available for purchase in Texas unbeatable and unavailable in taste and quality outside the Longhorn state (like everything else: breasts, strip clubs, sports teams) told me, "You look like a rat," and later, "You look like a heroin addict." At Iowa State University in Ames, I heard Fratboy, Fratter, Frat-Dick, Pussy, Pledge, Fucking Pledge, Neo (short for Neophyte) Active, Song & Skit Chair, Sorority Serenade Chair, Brother Hill, Academic Chair, Honor's Program Whore, Sausage-Fester, Virgin, You-Can't-Spell-Faggot-Without-An-A-T-O-fag, and with sincerity, Brother Muff. Favorite nicknames for which I received a solid certificate: French Scholar, Fiction Award Winner, All-Time Leader of Missed Classes in the English Department at Rhodes (played golf instead of going to class). And those with no certificate: Yankee, Damn Yankee, and an old boss with the northern Wisconsin accent, "Hee, Jan."

BOLD STATEMENT # 3: Ralph Waldo Emerson in "Nature" states that, "Words are finite organs of the infinite mind." Names we have been called translate the same way.

Depressed, Manic, Bipolar
Alcoholic
Suicidal
Recovering Alcoholic
Bipolar

The Piano Man = so Funny, highly Sensitive, Talented, *Beautiful*
Jonathan Hill (on Bachelor of Arts degree)
Brother & Son
Miracle
Jon
Sunshine

To move forward, as we (I) must with the construction my Personal Ad, we have at this point: SWM call me Jon. Now we add S for smoker with no intention of quitting unless a girl wants me to, who seeks SWF. Of course I do not want to discriminate, never rule out the possible (Grandma K told me before I left for college that if I ever brought home a black girl or Catholic girl she'd never speak to me again.) But female is that which I seek. By playing for the home team (the away team equaling homosexuality) I am not confused about my baseball metaphors. But with a work record featuring two long stints as a waiter at T.G.I. Fridays (Yes, I wore *fucking flair*) and the added knowledge that gay men with waiting experience tip the best, I have compromised my phone number for a 40% gratuity. Add a fellow employee, Jezebel, the big black queen of T.G.I.Fridays in Memphis, who paid for and presented me for the majority of my meals the Chargrilled Spicy Cajun Sandwich cut in half, to symbolize the testicles, with a pickle spear, to symbolize the penis, protruding from the sandwich halves or testicles with Bleu Cheese dressing on one end of the pickle to symbolize what Jezebel called Boy Juice, I should be confused. Michael, one of the bartenders, who used to supply my on-the-job drinking glass of Coke with rum, was the first man to pinch my (lacking) ass and ask me, "When're we going' out, cool guy?" leads me to realize two things 1) never answer to cool guy? "I'm not cool," because you will immediately hear, "Oh, yes you are," and, 2) there is a

supportable history of me visiting gay bars (for free drinks) and an incident of being kissed by a 6'5" drag queen in heels. Not important.

"What this essay needs is FOCUS. What this essay needs is guys playing football and rugby, cheap beer from a keg and an inventory of pornographic movies seen in high school."

"Hey, now," says the prepared response. "Gimme a hug; leave me the fuck alone."

This is how I respond to criticism.

Second verse same as the first: SWM call me Jon, S, seeks SWF *with an allergic reaction to sharp objects* . . . to be continued . . . let me think . . .

HOUSEHOLD OBJECTS & APOCALYPTIC MULES

BOLD STATEMENT # 4: I do want to talk memory or its capacity and its loss or where exactly what and why happens (Chance, Fate, Determinism, Luck, the *Desiderara*, a prayer found in Old St. Paul's Church in Baltimore in 1692 which states, "And whether or not it is clear to you, / no doubt the universe is unfolding as it should.") I want stories. Stories to tell. Some time back there are two events that have to be told as stories. BOLD STATEMENT # 5: Evidence for and against the past as something useful, downright tragic lessons never to be repeated again, force us to consider what might have happened instead. This is my story, not yours.

Bottoming out is essential for the alcoholic to recover. One must hit the

point at which there is no alternative. Let me preface without innuendo the impossible-to-explain with Bill Wilson, the founder of the largest Anonymous organization in the world, who writes in the *Big Book*, in the Chapter, "A Vision For You" that:

For most normal folks, drinking means conviviality, companionship and colorful imagination. It means release from care, boredom and worry. It is joyous intimacy with friends and a feeling that life is good. But not so with us in those last days of heavy drinking. The old pleasures were gone. They were but memories. Never could we recapture the great moments of the past. There was an insistent yearning to enjoy life as we once did and a heartbreaking obsession that some new miracle of control would enable us to do it. There was always one more attempt -- and one more failure (151).

(That is) He cannot picture his life without alcohol. Some day he will be unable to imagine life either with alcohol or without it. Then he will know loneliness such as few do. He will be at the jumping off place. He will wish for the end (152).

STORY # 1 (Realism): Memphis, TN., 1999. Soon after the Halloween I dressed as an Urban Cowboy for the third time in a row, there came a time period from Friday, November 9th thru Sunday the 11th, that I was alone in the Avalon Street house, address 669. Hunter was out of town, and Matt went camping with his girl. The cold of the Memphis fall along with the graffiti of the maple and sycamore and poplar trees along the street made things feel crisp and alive as the fall does. In this short time period I drank without sleep for close to 72 hours. Drank without being able to stop. Drank without being able to get drunk, which had never happened. Unfortunate for me at the time, the alcohol had stopped working. With no car I would bike, every few hours, to the Mid-Town Mini-Mart and see Sam the Israeli and try to fit as much beer into my backpack as my MasterCard would allow. Riding a bike drunk is not easy; this is my area of expertise. Considering I biked to Rhodes drunk with Miller Lite tallboys in my backpack instead of books that semester. Tallboys that I drank between classes in

Palmer Hall in the first floor men's restroom handicap stall. Biked to work loaded: One time crashing into the behind of a city bus on Madison Avenue going about 20 mph on a serious downhill.

But that Sunday during a Julia Roberts' movie marathon on TBS, having already seen *Pretty Woman* and *Sleeping with the Enemy*, I saw and watched entirely for the first time, *Steel Magnolias*, which has to be the most depressing movie of all goddamn time. Some time during the movie I hit my bottom. I froze. Called for my momma. Called Bruce, my dealer. And was unable to move from the second-hand yellow, old-people smelling easy chair, the best goddamn chair in the house. With my feet propped on the coffee table next to a green bong and cigarette rollers and a pile of unopened graduate school applications on which I had spilled some of the 1.75 bottle of McCormick's vodka I drank from, I stared at the television, the hallway to the kitchen where there were knives and other utensils. Stared at my bedroom door where I had the pocketknife I kept on my key chain, the generic aspirin. Stared through a wall to the backroom where there was laundry detergent and painting supplies, i.e. razor blades.

I drank and watched *Steel Magnolias* (because I was technically insane, and insane-insane to be watching the goddamn movie) insanely crying all through the last half-hour of the film when Julia Roberts' character dies of diabetes. Crying along with Shirley McClain, Sally Field, Dolly Parton, Tom Skerritt, Daryl Hannah and others. All I can see now is how PATHETIC. And I smirk at this kid who had lost over 40 pounds in in those last three months. Spent two

thousand dollars a month on drugs and alcohol in those last six months. Unshaved, sloppy, and ready to attempt that thing. This kid who felt like a failure after waking up in the bathroom on his last two attempts (Oct. 31 & Nov. 5), vomiting up a bottle of generic aspirin and half a kidney of Colt 45. This kid who knew exactly, that Sunday night, after *The Simpsons* and *X-Files*, he would do it this time with two bottles of the generic aspirin and the kicker, a new bottle of rubbing alcohol, which he'd tasted by dipping and then licking a Q-tip.

The liquor and beer ran out again and as I hopped on my bike to hit the Mid-Town Mini-Mart again, the phone rang in-between the cushions of the white couch we bought from a gay neighbor whose late partner had died of AIDS on. I answered the phone and it was my mother who had received an insurance bill from the doctors office I had visited after researching at the Rhodes' library the appropriate signs of Depression, to make sure I had them ass, so I could score something, Prozac or Zoloft. The goddamn doc prescribed me Paxil, 20 mg., i.e., Pez. The cocaine and LSD I prescribed myself so I could stay awake and drink more made me feel guilty, like unconsciously I knew being an alcoholic was okay but being an addict, "Geez, mommy and daddy would kill me."

My mother, Joann, asked what was going on. And I told her the whole deal. How I could not and could not stop drinking. I told how I planed to die and hung up. My mother called me over thirty times that day and night and kept me on the phone. She flew down the Memphis the next day and pulled me out of the house. Got me a medical leave from Rhodes. Had me tell Matt and Hunter that I was going home with her to enter rehab. Momma took me to a Days Inn and put

me in bed. All my friends the next day made me a cake. Bought me the new RED HOT CHILI PEPPERS and NINE INCH NAILS albums. Watched my favorite teen-drama movie *Can't Hardly Wait* with me for the last time while my momma packed up my clothes and made my bed. Momma also bought me a beer on the airplane from St. Louis to home because after 24 hours with no alcohol I went into mild DTs. I remember I had to show her my hands, the dirt under the fingernails, for her to believe me. Told her I wasn't doing it on purpose. Told her it hurt. Mild DTs which later became so overwhelming that the first night home with my father (not speaking) and grandfather (distant stares, the doctor in the family telling me to swallow more Paxil) and mother calling friends and co-workers to find the best rehab center in the area, that I snuck out of the house at night and walked to the Texaco down the street and bought a case of beer. A case of beer that I drank sitting against the closed garage door in the driveway. The whole case. Mom and Dad found me the next morning passed out on the cement, put me in the car and drove me to Detox at Genesis Hospital in Davenport, IA, where the nurses took my picture, fed me a shit-load of Adivan, and a day later I woke up in my room in a pair of my father's winter pajamas, out of Detox, the room smelling of piss and sweat. Only my skinny-ass fingers trembled.

Wednesday, November 14th, 1999 is my sobriety date.

I have not had a drink since.

STORY # 2 (Abstract): M.A.R.C. Unit (Multiple Addiction Recovery Center) at Genesis Hospital. Imagine Bob the Counselor getting to the root of your insanity by talking about why you never wear shoes, "Why do you wear flip

flops?”

I lied.

Bob the Counselor asks, “How do you feel?”

“Good.”

“Not suicidal?”

“Not today.”

“Any plans?”

“No.”

“Sure?”

“Well I looked at the folding chairs in the lobby and figured if I stuck my head in a certain way I could probably do it.”

“Sounds like a plan to me.”

“I look at it and go, yeah, that’s what I’ll do. It’s always been that way.”

Jeff and me walked down to the Intensive Care Lounge everyday where there was a free espresso machine. Drank free espresso and read the *good* magazines. When asked if we were supposed to be there, I told the volunteer nurses that Jeff and I volunteered here at the hospital during the week. Part of our college curriculum.

“I care about the little fucker,” Charlie the Veteran told John the Family Counselor at the Monday morning client meeting. The little fucker is you. You just remembered that you haven’t thought about your freshman year of high school in a long time.

I had a plan. I’d taped a pair of scissors to the inside of a pair of blue

jeans. The nurses missed it when they went through my shit. Bob the Counselor got that out of me, I don't remember how. I told him I needed the scissors to trim my kick-ass sideburns. After the police came I was not allowed to sit in folding chairs. I had to sit on the floor. Not allowed to shave. Had to shit with a nurse present who watched my hands as if I might magically procure a shotgun via my colon.

Jeff was a meth addict. Valedictorian of his University, diagnosed with the virus HIV, AIDS. He was the first gay man I ever kissed on the cheek when we graduated together in late December.

Cindy was a pregnant alcoholic who'd wrecked her truck one night.

Motherlove said she was chemically dependant; her drug of choice was alcohol.

I gave Greg, alcoholic, my favorite green t-shirt after he told me to stay. That because I thought rehab was bullshit, that rehab was easy, "Go to meetings, One day at a time," because I wanted to go home for Thanksgiving. He told me that was the disease telling me to drink. Two days later he left the Unit to go back to the streets of West Davenport and sleep behind the police station. He never once slept in his bed.

My family ate Thanksgiving with me in the Unit. When my brother came home from Purdue, on his break, he found my wallet and ran around the house saying, "Where's Jon? "Is he dead?" I told my parents to call Jeff and tell him what was up. They didn't. They didn't want anyone to know where I was.

I couldn't even cut my fingernails with fingernail clippers, the bastards.

Bastards wouldn't even give me the free pink booties. For revenge, when the fingernails grew out I filed them. Even had Candy (that's her name, no bullshit) the Crack-Addict paint them for me. Silver with glitter. Bob the Counselor said I was crazy.

I was pretty.

Motherlove prayed with me before my first family-counseling meeting. She'd drank a whole in her stomach lining. Docs told her if she drank again she'd die. She prayed for me like Langston Hughes. Two days later she left the Unit. Drank and didn't die.

Tina, my advisor at Rhodes, director of the undergraduate writing program, told me when I called her that I should read as much Raymond Carver as I could. I told her what was going on, "Keep a journal," she said. "It's great material."

On family day, only my mother came to be with me. She knew I smoked now. After five years of hiding cigarettes, keeping mouthwash and peanut butter in my car to kill the smell when I was home, she bought me cigarettes now. When I asked her, in group, why I knew nothing about her past other than she rode on the back of motorcycle and skinny dipped in the Mississippi river in high school, the family's past, why nothing made sense as I was diagnosed for alcohol dependence, a disease. I told her all I think about is killing myself and drinking. She collapsed into tears. Talked about her unhappy marriage, her childhood as a perfect doll. Her mother as a speed addict for 30 years. Her father, the doctor, she was not allowed, even to that day, to talk about, "I can't or it'll ruin his

reputation.” She cried. I bent forward and touched her knee. Later, Cindy told me there wasn’t a dry eye in the room when Mom and me were in the center of Family group.

My father wrote a letter to his father near the end of family counseling. He talked about wishing he could’ve played catch with his father. Talked. How after dinner he used to sit on the stairs and cry because he wasn’t allowed to be less than perfect.

I talked with my doctor about Raymond Carver. My doctor was a published poet. Everyday he tacked a new Carver poem to my door. When he asked me why I didn’t believe in God or any form of a higher power, my answer was, “Because He made me UGLY.”

I had to be sedated after he left because I tried to break out the unbreakable glass in my hospital room. I wish I could remember his name.

What I fear is this: Silence, no response to my Personal Ad:

SWM call me Jon, S, seeks SWF with an allergic reaction to sharp objects, knows there is no resolve for core issues, loves Beethoven’s *Moonlight Sonata* & Rachmaninoff & Colt 45 & the South, believes in something bigger than herself, isn’t a stripper, hates Kurt Vonnegut Jr., To read poetry aloud to each other & watch movies & has the patience / belief that I will awake from nightmares, Pl. incl. pic. of collarbones.

BOLD STATEMENT # 6: Knowing for myself only that we do not get what we want, we get what we are given. I cannot abbreviate myself. No one involved in the human condition should want or even need to reduce the body the mind the spirit to 78 words to get laid. BOLD STATEMENT # 6 1/2: Screw getting laid.

COURAGEOUS BOWELS

Telling you, “Hi, my name is Jon, and I’m an alcoholic,” is not courage.

Telling you I had my Tarot cards read the other day and that the woman said I was waking from my nightmare, that I would beat out any and all competition and that I would find love did not make me happy. She told me exactly what I wanted to hear.

Telling you what Dr. Rip told me during the Summer of ‘00 that I should only play the piano for myself and not for my mother, that by playing for myself I could become The Piano Man (Dr. Rip loves Billy Joel) because if I did not, at one time, physically separate myself from her the result might have been fatal, reinforced what Dr. Rip told me about the universe, “It’s all about pain.”

Telling you what I fear being accused of or being told is difficult. That I fear being told, “You had a choice.” I fear being told, “You think you’re a sad victim of the world and circumstance.” I fear being told, “You fucked up,” “Buck up,” “You’re not really an alcoholic.” I fear, especially, “One drink won’t kill ya, boy.”

Telling you that in the present, being surrounded by those who want to be serious writers (like me) who are as talented, as intelligent, and produce work that causes jealousy within me, while being able to have a few drinks, or to appropriately, “Throw down,” is difficult to watch because I’ve begun to tell

myself that I can get away with a drink or two, these people around me drink and, “Throw down,” and do get up the next day and work or teach or make progress toward some realistic dream. Telling you this is why I am scared of you.

Telling you that the other day when my mother ran into my freshman golf coach in high school, Mr. Brinkmeyer and that she said to me, “He was shocked to hear how well you’re doing with what you’re doing. He said he tried to talk to you but you we’re so quiet. He thought something was wrong and you never said anything,” is a beginning.

Telling you this is why I never talked about my freshman year with anyone. Not until rehab anyway, eight years later. I never talked about the fact that everyday I went to school I had to take two changes of clothes because the seniors on the basketball team would throw me in the shower room after I had changed out of my yellow and black gym clothes and hold me down until I was soaked. That before lunch the seniors slammed me into the hallway lockers outside of French class. That I told my parents this had stopped. That after I’d dressed I in the shower room, under the faucets so I wouldn’t be thrown in. That I walked against the lockers so I wouldn’t ricochet back into them and be thrown again. That the only reason I thought they were doing this to me was because I was 15 years old, wore glasses too big for my face, was 6’2” and only weighed 125 pounds. Was so skinny and uncoordinated I walked with my head down, my back hunched, to watch me feet so I wouldn’t trip over them. Not have to look anyone in the eye. That because I didn’t have expensive clothes or BECAUSE I WAS A DORK gave me no fucking right to believe that what happened was the

result of me being UGLY.

Telling you that when you feel like that, UGLY, you understand why kids bring guns and bombs to school. You sympathize with them, not those who respond with shock.

Telling you that I believe I am *beautiful* is courage.

Telling you about Jimmy the Plumber, my spiritual advisor (recovery speak for sponsor) and how we used to meet in the mornings for the 10:30 am Wonderland meeting and clean the tables and make coffee is only for me. Telling you he introduced me to the wonders of strip clubs, THE GOLD CLUB in Memphis in particular, where I at one time I had a VIP card and a custom made ball cap with THE GOLD CLUB embroidered on the front and I studied there and dated a girl from Mississippi named Dia (stage name Pleasure) who worked there and had the second most beautiful voice I have ever heard (the first being my mother who can sing the shit out of Handel and Bach) until she started doing X and working for a escort service and then I was left to driving around Memphis, Summer Avenue in particular with Jimmy the Plumber at night listening to The Beatles, Alison Krause, Sade, Jackson Brown, and Willie Nelson until we'd do it all again the next day is living One Day at a Time.

Telling you that I am medicated and happy is courage.

Telling you what I fear and wish for is not courage. Telling you to respond to my Personal Ad is dumb and impossible because it does not have a voice. Telling you why I write stories will get me nowhere because by telling stories and lying and inventing worlds similar to the world in which you read this

essay is bullshit for the only place I feel safe besides Jimmy the Plumbers' 20 foot long couch does not make me feel safe.

Telling you that Jimmy the Plumber called me the other night to wish me a happy 2 years of sobriety is not true. That takes place on November 14 if I make it there. And on that day you will not see me because I will be with my real family, in the fellowship of other alcoholics. Although telling you that Jimmy the Plumber called that night to see if I'd gotten any, "Stanky on my hangdown," tells me exactly what I fear. And what I fear is what has not been said.

Telling you that Jimmy and I laughed so hard on the phone that night that I woke up the neighbors' dogs is the only courage I know to be honest.